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No. 2

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WEST

Every Other Friday One Shilling

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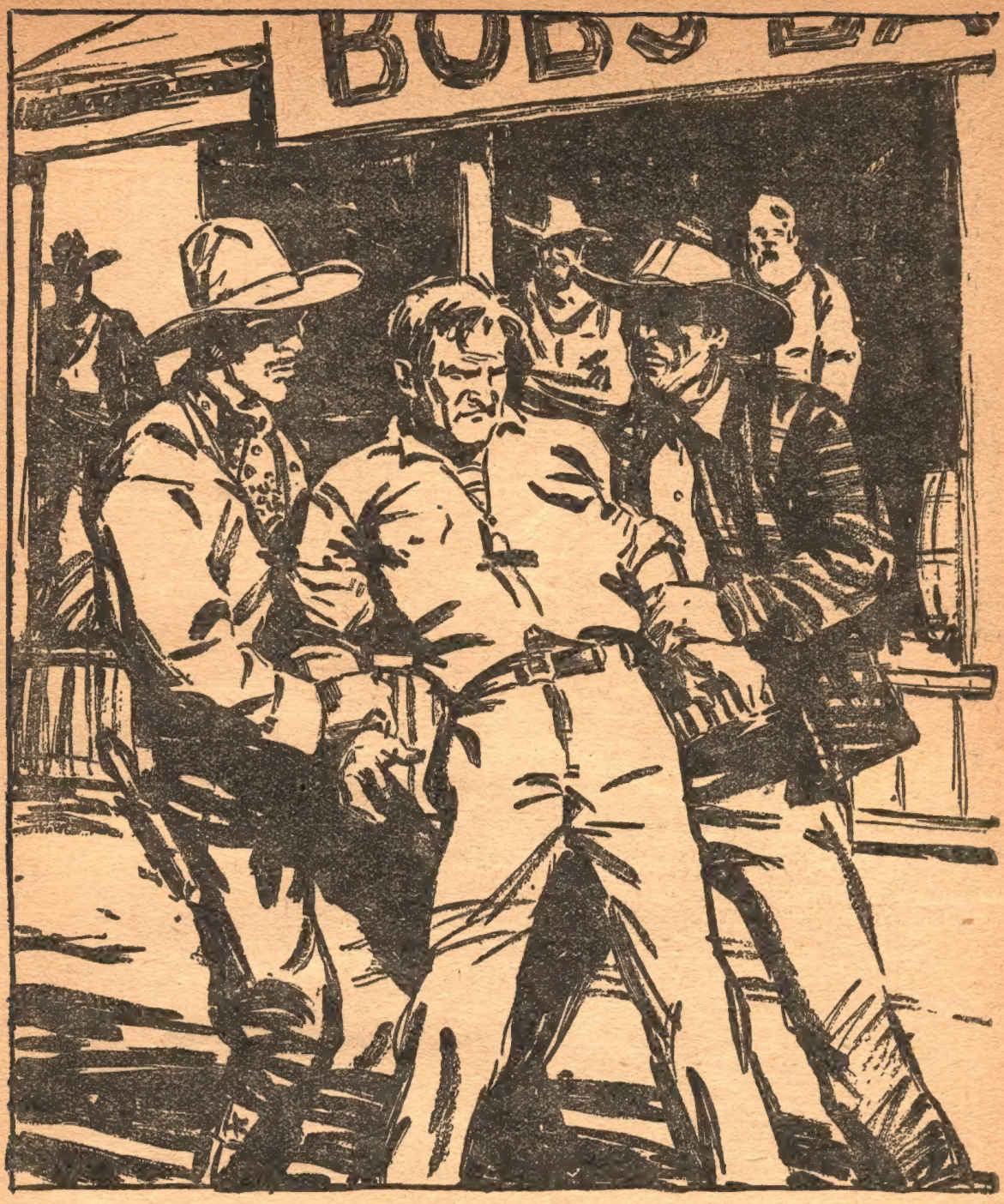


CATALOGUE COWBOY AND CO.

By S. OMAR BARKER

Author of "Forty Ways," "The No-Game Hunter," etc.

EITHER the stranger did not realize that his leather-creaking, slack-reined progress down the dusty main drag of Dos Pasos was attracting a lot of attention, or else he did a good job of pretending not to notice it. He rode stiff-backed, stiff-necked, the bridle reins gripped in a gauntleted right hand resting firmly upon the saddlehorn.

In the doorway under a sign that read "Post Office—Schurtz for Shirts and Genl.

The Foreman Had Asked for Help on This Rustling Proposition, but He Hadn't Expected It to Come in the Shape of a Mail Order Cowboy Detective, Bellering and Waving His Tail All over the Place

Merchandise," the proprietor rolled a dead cigar stub from one corner of his wide, fat-lipped mouth to the other and back again as he watched. A few feet from him a thick-middled, heel-squatting hombre teetered a little on battered boot heels, eased the heavy hogleg at his hip, sluiced the plank walk brownly with cud juice, and cocked a squint-eyed face up at the leading merchant and postmaster of Dos Pasos.

"Won't be sellin' *him* none of your raiment an' riggin', Sowbelly," he grinned. "Look like he's done bought out the catalogue!"

"Um! You know him, this feller?"

"Might be Adam—under them duds." The thick-middled hombre's shrugged shoulders touched the floppy brim of his black flat-crowned hat. "He's whoain' up at the Broadhorn."

Sowbelly Sam Schurtz rolled the dead cigar again. His pink right palm reached out two silver dollars.

"Maybe you vouldn't like to run down buy him a drink, Villie?"

With a face-twist that might have been meant for a wink, Bully Bill Hyatt rose, took the silver and slogged down the street with the slow arrogance of a bull. From the livery stable across the street another armed man in a flat crowned black sombrero strolled over through the reddish dust haze of twilight and squatted on his heels where Bill Hyatt had been.

LAMPS were already lit in the Broadhorn Saloon. Their yellow light gleamed upon the bright, unweathered nickel conchos of the stranger's chaps as he swaggered in through the swings. The half dozen dusty cowhands in the saloon looked up casually at first, then stared in amazement. In the hard-bitten cow village of Dos Pasos men didn't come busting into the Broadhorn togged out from heel to hat crown like a picture from the catalogue, all new at once—from gun to gut-strap.

"Damn if it ain't Mister Monkey Ward hisself!"

"Y'ought to come out an' spit on his saddle, too, Chink!"

Four or five grinning, rough dressed punchers in black, flat crowned hats shoved in behind the stranger. If he had come in more unobtrusively, even in such radiant raiment, the poorest of cow country manners would have kept their mouths shut for a while at least. But this glorified stranger strode in as if he were the man that drowned the duck. He made straight for the bar, swinging his long arms, and stuck his gloved hand across it.

Chin on his brisket with startled surprise, old Stutterin' Ike got his wet, limp hand well pumped in effusive greeting, before he realized what was happening. Cow country manners don't call for shaking hands with bartenders on sight.

"Uncork a few bottles of your best, pardner!" The stranger swung around, waved a long arm and addressed the room as if from a platform. "Gents, I go by the name of Karr—Range Detective Kenneth Karr, rustler-wrangler by habit and profession. I'm the curly wolf of cowboy detectives. I've come here to stop this stealing on the RMD and stop it quick!"

His gloved right hand groped for his gun, missed it, groped again, found it and gripped the holt an instant, released it and cut the air again with a gesture of invitation. A lordly smile broke open the broad expanse of face that showed the red of sunburn, but little of its tan. His slightly bulging blue eyes looked them over boldly. Amusement, slightly puzzled, some of it a little wary, showed on a dozen leathery faces. Even the squinty mug of Bully Bill Hyatt wore the sour half of a grin as he bulged in through the door-wings.

"Gents, Cattle Detective Karr invites all *honest* cowmen present to step up and swaller!"

Nobody moved. There was a general swapping of grins among all the men in puncher rig—except one. After one contemptuous glance, this man kept his eyes upon the solitaire game spread on the table where he sat. Visible on his brown neck, under the brim of his weathered gray Stetson, were fuzzy little curlicues of yellow hair that needed cutting pretty badly. The brown brand of range and round-up, wind and sun, could not hide the youth of his lean face any more than the worn shabbiness of his clothing could conceal its one-time class and quality. A sort of half sullen, half hard-boiled sulkiness sagged his jaw as he slowly played his cards.

AT THE bar Detective Karr was repeating his breezy invitation. Stuttering Ike skidded empty whiskey glasses dexterously up and down the bar.

"K-k-kinder early in the e-evenin' f-fuhfer, y-y'know, honest, cu-cu-cowboys, stranger!" He ranged the bar with amber bottles.

Bill Hyatt and the rest looked questioningly toward a pair of coal black hoss-tail mustaches adorning the eagle-beaked face of a tall hombre slouching against the bar. Almost imperceptibly this man winked, and

the waiting punchers crowded to the bar, more of contempt than good fellowship in their grins.

"Mr. Detective," boomed the black-mustached hombre, "it's a pleasure! You got no idea how pleased us honest cowmen is to see a man like you sent down here to clean up this nefarious rustling business, sir! Here's to——"

Detective Karr, the greeting only half acknowledged, was already shoving his way along the bar. At the end he stopped. The man at the card table had not budged.

"You, there!" bellowed the hospitable stranger. "Maybe you didn't hear me?"

The blond hombre played up a jack.

"I heard you," he said curtly, without looking up.

How the tradition first started nobody knows. But tradition it was. However mail-orderish Kenneth Karr may have appeared as a stock detective, evidently he knew the etiquette of cow country drink-

ing. Here, it seemed, was an insult, and well nigh a dozen hard bitten range men watching to see how he would take it. He scowled ominously. He strode over within two steps of the hombre at the table. His gloved hand gripped the butt of his .45. His voice sneered with sarcasm.

"I said all *honest* cowmen, step up an' drink, cowboy! I represent the law!" He flipped over his jacket flap, displaying a cheap new star. "Now what about it?"

Chilly gray eyes gazed up at him.

"To hell with you an' the law!"

New leather squeaked as Karr's gun came out of the holster. With quiet speed the smaller man came to his feet.

"You asked for it!" Cold contempt chilled his voice, but he did not shoot. The well worn barrel of his six-gun thumped hard upon Karr's gloved knuckles. The new gun blazed, spudding a bullet into the table top, well out of line with the smaller man's body. It slipped from Karr's grip and thumped to the floor. The boyish faced hombre prodded new belt leather hard with the snout of his own gun. His slender left hand smacked open-palmed, once, twice, upon Karr's ruddy face. He stooped, picked up the other gun and laid it on the table.

Then he stepped back a couple of yards, holstered his own gun, pulled out the makin's and began to roll a smoke. He chin-pointed at the gun on the table between them.

"Don't wait on me, Mr. Detective," he said, batting his eyes. "Pick it up any time you're ready!"

With an oath Karr backed quickly up to the bar.

"To hell with it!" he growled. "I've got too much business ahead of me, gents, trailin' down rustlers, for this kind of monkey business now. Drink up, gents. I'll 'tend to that coyote later!"

IT MIGHT have been significant that, with an amused tolerance and a minimum of contemptuous rawhiding, they drank, then, with Detective Kenneth Karr. Karr watched suspiciously, but without making a move, when after a few minutes, the other hombre walked calmly out.

Presently Bully Bill Hyatt spent the two bucks Sowbelly Sam Schurtz had given him and returned to drop anchor again beside the store door.

Sowbelly Sam rolled his dead cigar.

"Vell?"

"He's wearin' a star—as new as them duds," chuckled Bully Bill. "But don't let it fret you, Sowbelly, for if he's got any brains I don't know where he totes 'em. They ain't in his head, an' they cain't be in his guts, 'cause he ain't got none."

Then he outlined what had happened.

"An' dis odder feller?" grunted Sam Schurtz.

"Todd's gone to chaw it over with him. Better light up that cigar, Sowbelly, yonder comes Michaels, an' he's got Karr sidin' him. You look a heap sweeter in a cloud of smoke!"

Michaels was the RMD ranch manager or general foreman. It was no enjoyable job, with the owners stuck to desk swivels a thousand miles away eastward, riding him, on paper, every time he sent in an accounting, for the continual heavy losses from rustling that his own honesty compelled him to report. The customary worried look on his waspish face seemed not to be lessened any by the company and unrestrained oratory of Cowboy Detective Kenneth Karr as they came up the street.

Karr jumped to hold the door open for Michaels and followed him into the store. Bully Bill Hyatt got up, lounged in after them and sat on a staple keg.

"Vell, vell! How-dee-do, Mizder Michaels!" Sowbelly Sam's cordiality gurgled through great puffs of cigar smoke from behind the counter. "Ve don't see you much in town, Mizder Michaels! Have a cigar?"

The little cowman shook his head morosely.

"No thanks, Schurtz. Bull—a dozen sacks, please. You couldn't guess, I reckon, why I'm not in oftener?"

"Guess? Py cholly, Mizder Michaels, vat an ol' storekeeper know 'bout such dings? You don't like the town, maybe?"

"I don't like," said Foreman Michaels with some bitterness, "that the minute I'm off the ranch ever damn loose rope in the country knows it an' goes to swingin'!"

"You mean," demanded Detective Karr loudly, "that them rustlers become unusually active when you're in town? Why, that's fine, Mr. Michaels! Now that I'm here, you just stay in town, see? That'll give me my chance to rush out there and grab 'em red-handed! And by the way, Mr. Schurtz—I noticed the name over the door—let me introduce myself. As one of the leading citizens of Dos Pasos, I know you're goin' to be mighty pleased to know that the RMD owners have sent me down here from K. C. to stop this rustling business an' stop it quick! Karr's the name—Range Detective Karr!"

HE STUCK out a gauntleted hand. "Py cholly, bleased to meet you, Mizder Garr! Make my store your headqvarters, Mizder Garr—unless, maybe you like the company better by the saloon, eh?"

Karr scowled.

"You heard about that, too, eh? Well, don't let it fool you. I ain't through with that hombre, yet." He lowered his voice. "Jest between us right here, I'm onto him. Gents, he's one of your main rustlers, or my name ain't Ken Karr!"

"Come on," said Michaels dryly, "more room for wind outside."

A few yards down the street Michaels pulled Karr to a halt.

"You double damned fool," he said disgustedly. "The feller that slapped your face ain't even been around here more'n a week—an' hardly outa the saloon! This rustlin's been goin' on for months. Now you listen to me. Them owners may of sent you down here, like you say, but I'm still bossin' this end of the job, an' I don't want no part of you. Bust on back to K. C. an' blow up in their faces if you like, but git loose from me before I bust you one in that damn big mug, you savvy!"

"But Mr. Michaels, if you don't kinder coöperate, how can I——?"

"Coöperate my hind leg!" Michaels spoke plenty angrily now. "I got troubles enough without nursin' idiots. Yonder's your hoss. If you cain't git on him by yerself, I'll boost yuh—but git on him, an' travel! I hear of you big-windyin' around here agin in the name of the RMD brand, damn if I don't shoot yuh on sight!"

With a sharp, swift movement the little foreman whirled the bigger man around. The kick landed true, smack on the pants

seat. A moment later Range Detective Karr was riding out of Dos Pasos the way he had come—but faster. It was too dark now for Michaels to see that he was grinning. Pleased, maybe, to be dusting out of this inhospitable village so soon.

THE hombre with the black mustaches found the blond young puncher currying his sorrel horse by lantern light in the livery stable.

"By God, cowboy," he said, "you kinder smack 'em, don't you? My name's Todd. Newcomer here, ain't you?"

"Yeah—an' a soon-goer. Got to find me a job some place. They seem mighty scarce around here."

"Maybe," said Todd judicially, "you ain't asked the right places."

"Where else? I've bumped the RMD an' the Ladder X. There ain't no more big spreads, an' I notice all these little two-bit outfits got more hands than cattle already. Like yours for instance."

"Still an' all," grinned Todd. "I might use another hand awhile. Some o' my boys got little brands of their own to look after. Don't mind me askin' where you come frum, Mister—Mister——"

"Smith—only the first name ain't Mister. Man hollers 'Whitey,' my ears gen'rally goes up. An' I don't mind your askin' where I hail from, Todd—if you don't mind me not tellin' you. Maybe I left there too fast to remember."

The gray eyes twinkled a little without losing their glint of hardness.

Todd lit his smoke, cleared his throat.

"Let's talk turkey, Whitey. I been seein' you around. I don't like to see a man around without no work, an' I could use another man. You ride an' rope as cool as you played it this evenin', why you're him. Your work won't interfere none with your pleasure—where lockin' horns with Mr. Range Detective Karr is concerned. I run the BXB out south."

"You've hired you a cowhand, Todd," said Whitey Smith laconically. "Which-away's the wagon?"

FOREMAN MICHAELS had no settin' hen's job. The RMD was a big spread, sprawling its loosely bounded range from hell to Halifax; and thanks to the ignorance or stinginess, or both, of its owners, he had to run it year in, year out shorthanded. It would have been a hard riding job for a crew of twenty. Under owners' orders Michaels ran it with ten, counting the cook. Nine underpaid, hard riding fools, loyal to the foreman who stuck to this sinking ship of his for no apparent reason but that he was of a sticking breed.

For as sure as daily sunset, rustling was sinking the RMD—steady, systematic rustling of every variety. Not the least of it was an underground traffic in hides—hides ripped from the carcasses of RMD cows, whose unbranded or sleepered calves were never found, or at least could never be surely identified again.

"You say you know pretty well who some of these rustlers are," wrote the absentee owners, "why don't you have them arrested and prosecuted?"

It was no use to try to tell them that knowing is one thing, proving another; that law out here was still a helpless, suckling infant in such matters, the nearest sheriff taking his ease at the county seat a hundred miles away. Give a man a dozen well paid gunmen to back up his cowboys and something might be done. But the owners apparently had fish in too many other kettles. It was up to him, with the crew he had, and if these losses from stealing continued they'd be obliged to sell out the ranch, even at a loss.

For Michaels, such sale might well be a bitter dose to swallow. No cow foreman enjoys having a ranch sold out from under him, especially on account of conditions he has failed to cure. Besides, in this case, Michaels had a hunch who the buyer might turn out to be.

It was a mess and the waspy little foreman didn't like it. He had appealed repeatedly for help on this rustling proposition, but he hadn't expected it to come in the shape of a mail order cowboy detective,

bellering and waving his tail all over the place.

No wonder, then, that he felt pretty ringy when he got back to the ranch the next day to find that the man he had kicked out of Dos Pasos had been there ahead of him, with his brags and ballyhoo.

"Meet Kenneth Karr, gents! Range detective an' rustler-wrangler de luxe. I'm here to clean out this stealin' on the RMD for you boys, an' clean it out quick!"

It hadn't been belief in such talk, but rather a disgusted desire to get shed of him as quickly as possible that had made old Bat-Eye Williams, the ranch coosie, give the stranger a grudging supply of rations.

"Where'd this damn fool head for when he left here?"

Bat-Eye waved a rheumatic arm in a wide gesture that took in half the world.

"Nev' mind askin' *me*," he grumbled. "When he don't know hisownse'f, how the hard side o' hell you figger me to?"

All that Michaels said about it to the hands was:

"Any of you boys stumble onto a picture-book puncher squeakin' his leather around anywheres on our range, I don't give a damn if you leave him for the buzzards!"

But it is doubtful if the buzzards would have been interested. They were already fat, and within that week a new feast awaited them in one of the scores of brush hidden draws far down toward the southwest line of the RMD range; nine skinned carcasses of wet cows, and not a one of the nine calves in sight. The slaughter was about a day old when Michaels and two of his cowboys found it.

Cursing they read the sign: half a dozen riders, two or more pack horses. The cows had not been shot. They had been roped and axed. There were three trails of wind-dimmed tracks leaving the *matanza;* three riders driving the calves one way, two leading the horses packed with the cowhides another, and one rider alone, zigzagging, skulking, crisscrossing the other trails—obviously a rear guard scout.

The two young punchers with Michaels were good cowhands, but they were not hardbitten gunmen. Nevertheless they looked carefully to the loading of their six-guns, and with the foreman, set out grimly on the trail of the driven calves. After a mile it got hard to follow and they traveled slow.

SUDDENLY the smacking sound of shots jerked them up, listening. The shots, briefly spaced, continued. They seemed to come from another brushy draw not more than half a mile away. Probably still on RMD range.

Foreman Michaels' eyes wore a grim light.

"Be worth the money to ketch some of 'em redhanded, boys," he said shortly. "Or it might be that Jimpson or one of the others has run into trouble. We better take us a look."

They swerved swiftly westward, using the spurs. From the flat ridgetop they could see nothing down in the brushy cove

beyond, but the shooting continued. And now they heard, too, the thump of galloping hoofs.

Michaels had meant to sneak down into the cove afoot, but at that sound he changed his mind.

"We better rush 'em, boys. They're on the move!"

Their faces brush-whipped at every jump, the three men wolfed it down into the cove, keeping their gun hands free.

At the edge of a small juniper dotted clearing the wizened foreman suddenly jerked rein. Their mouths agape, the two cowhands yanked up beside him, staring in

amazement. Yonder across the clearing something heavy swayed gently, hanging from a juniper limb. But it was not a man. It was a gunny sack, ballasted with rocks. And before it, galloping back and forth, emptying his six-gun at the swaying target each time he passed, was a rider—a rider whose leather gear squeaked and creaked with newness.

"Hail, hello an' howdy, gents!" shouted Cowboy Detective Karr cordially. "Join me in a little target practice?"

Fluently, bitterly, Foreman Michaels cursed him.

"Why—why Mister Michaels!" Karr looked painfully puzzled. "Yesterday I seen some fellers at a distance, drivin' off some calves. I jest knowed they must be some of them rustlers, so I jest snuck back here to kinder practice up on my shootin', so when I take in to follow 'em I won't be missin' my shots an' wastin' ammunition! Y'see I ain't been——"

"Shut up!" Foreman Michaels was loosening his lass rope. "By God, you addle-headed kindergarden cowboy, I aim to git rid of your prankin' if I got to hang you to do it!" He started to swing the loop.

With a yowl like a spooked cattymount Cowboy Detective Karr swung suddenly down to the far side of his horse like an Indian, the tall bay whirled and lunged for the brush. Before Foreman Michaels could grab out his gun, the rider and horse were gone; and in the surprise of their sudden going, the shots of the two RMD punchers missed.

As one man they clapped spurs to their mounts and started in pursuit. But their foreman, still cursing, shouted them back.

"To hell with him!" he snorted. "We got bigger fish to fry! We better git back to our trailin'!"

But out on the sand flats calf tracks and horse tracks alike petered out, whipped to invisibility by the wind. At dark they gave it up. It was well into the night that the three got back to the ranch, empty handed.

THE tow headed cowboy who called himself Whitey Smith didn't need magic spectacles to perceive that Blackie Todd's BXB was a growing brand. Sleeper a calf with a light-run RMD connected, and any fool with a hot iron could quickly make a BXB out of it. And several of Todd's men had brands equally appropriate. If the method looked to him dangerously bald-faced and obvious, he made no comment. The true test of any method of thievery is how well you get away with it, and apparently Todd's gang had little to worry about on that score. As long as they saw to it that they were never caught redhanded it would take hell's hottest lawyer and a damn sight stricter court than could be mustered at Dos Pasos to hang anything on them. It looked like a safe, cinch system to Whitey Smith.

Todd put him at roustabout work at first and said nothing about the business that sent the others riding, singly and in groups, out and in at all hours of the night. Often enough they rode northward, but returned from the rough, broken country lying off southwest.

Whitey Smith took his orders and kept his mouth shut.

But one evening when Todd and a batch of his crew rode in home an hour after dark, following one of their frequent loafing days in town, Whitey Smith was gone. When he rode in toward midnight Todd was waiting for him alone out by the saddle sheds. He greeted him harshly.

"Where the hell you think you been, cowboy?"

Whitey Smith did not answer in words. His thin grin showed faintly in the moonlight. He chunked a heavy sack down from behind his saddle, shook two fresh, neatly skinned cowhides out of it.

"Weaned you a coupla calves this evenin', Todd. Kinder wanted to see if I'd been manure-forkin' around so long I'd fergot how."

The big, black-mustached hombre cursed softly but not disapprovingly. His hand went groping into the damp bundle, feeling

for the brand. Instead it found that some of the right hip-hide was missing, neatly half-mooned out. The RMD brand rode the right hip. So, for that matter, did the BXB.

"I always figger to earn my wages," said Whitey Smith a little belligerently. "You don't like it you can go to hell, an' I'll draw my time!"

"Percentage," said Todd. "Ain't much due you—yet. If this job don't backfire on you, I reckon you'll do to stay till you earn some more. Only don't bring these damn hides here. I'll show you where to take 'em, kid. An' don't fergit; you git yourself caught an' there ain't ary one of us ever seen you before—outside of the saloon. You savvy?"

"I savvy," answered Whitey Smith sharply. "An' don't you foster the idee that I'm runnin' with you wolves because I like you, either. It's a job, an' I aim to work at it, that's all."

Todd scowled.

"You talk purty brash fer a young'un, but it's all right by me as long as the—er—the work goes on. Only don't ever git you the notion that you can tough it with Blackie Todd or any of my men like you done with that greenhorn detective, Smith. We ain't that breed of dog."

THAT same night Jimpson, of the RMD, reported "strange doin's" to his boss. That afternoon, riding the outlying ridges for the purpose of drifting in what stuff he might find there to the more open mesas near the ranch, he had spied a lone rider, a long way off, working cattle.

"Looked like he was ropin' calves," said Jimpson, "an' workin' fast. But I couldn't make out no sign of smoke, so he wasn't brandin'. I lit out to come on him as quick as I could, but he must have had the ravens sharp-eyein' for him, an' got notice I was comin', because time I got there, he'd done took out. The sign showed he'd been ropin' all right. An' by the tracks, he knowed how. Nope, nary a sleepered calf, nary a cut ear, nary a skun cow like they been doin'. But I did notice somethin' kinder funny. Dozen or more of them calves had dirty noses!"

"Damn it, Jimpson," snapped Foreman Michaels, "you pick a hell of a subject to git funny on. They're rustlin' us to death an' you find calves with dirty noses!"

"Hold on a minute!" Jimpson's face flushed angrily. The long strain of overwork, of bafflement, of bitterness that the best they could do availed nothing to stop the plague that was on them, had the nerves of the RMD hands rubbed raw. Sharp speech was like so much salt in open wounds. "Damn it, I'm talkin', Mike. You don't care to listen, say so!"

Michaels batted his eyes wearily.

"Right," he said quietly. "Go ahead."

"Their noses," Jimpson went on, "them calves' noses looked kinder smudged, somehow, specially in the middle where their tongues don't reach. Blackish. Sooty, only maybe they was likewise kinder greasy."

"All right, Jimpson, spring it an' git it over with." Foreman Michaels growled it out.

But Jimpson had no joke to spring. He was dead serious. He had trailed this hombre till it came dark on him, then shagged it on home.

"Sucker bait, I reckon," surmised the foreman. "Somebody stagin' a ropin' where he was sure you'd see him, while the rest done the dirty work some place else. Smeared them noses to work on your curiosity an' delay you follerin' him, maybe. Or maybe we've all rode ourselves kinder crazy, I dunno. But let's git to bed. We're ridin' out agin at three."

He'd had a letter from the owners that day. Old Sowbelly Schurtz, as he often did, had sent a man out with it. It was a favor Michaels never thanked him for. For a postmaster, Schurtz took too much interest in the mail of some of his patrons. The letter had mentioned that they were sending one Kenneth Karr, expert detective, to take hold of the rustling situation.

"We expect you to give him every cooperation. If, between you, you can show no definite results toward curbing the losses from stealing and landing the thieves in jail, and that very shortly, it is our intention to sell. We understand from the agent of our prospective buyer that he does not plan to retain any of the present working force of the ranch on the payroll. As you know, it is only the provision in our deceased uncle's will that has compelled us to keep you on as foreman, Mr. Michaels, to date. Now, with the assistance we are sending you, we expect results.

"Very truly yours,
"McDollin Brothers."

Before he went to bed, Foreman Michaels crushed the letter and jammed it in the stove.

"You citified nuts wasn't ol' Rick McDollin's nephews, I'd of quit you plumb back before the devil set fire to hell!"

THEREAFTER, when the rustlers rode, Whitey Smith rode with them, or he rode alone, on the same sort of business.

At the pink of sunrise, a few days later, Todd, Whitey and three others, hustling a little cut of calves before them, paused on a ridge hump for a brief backward look. Into the grass cove where they had just left, half a mile away, came a lone rider, at a dead gallop. He yanked his horse to a sudden stop, his arms flapping.

Todd focussed upon him quickly with field glasses.

"Wavin' us to stop," he grunted. "Gettin' out a carbine."

Bright metal glinted in the pink sunlight back in the cove. A faraway *whapping* sound whipped the air. A rifle bullet whined off a rock thirty steps short of them. Another, closer but still a wide miss. Another, a dozen steps to the right.

"Well, by God!" exclaimed Blackie Todd. "Look who's shootin' at us!"

He offered Whitey the glasses, but Whitey did not need them. Even at half a mile Cowboy Detective Karr's mail order finery with its flaming orange bandanna and bright blue shirt, stood out as recognizable as a bonfire.

"Chink," Todd addressed the nearest rustler, "it could be that tin-horn has recognized us. You an' me better slip back there an'——"

"Like hell," Chink broke in with a snarl. "Supposin' he's jest baitin' the trap, with ol' Michaels an' his whole damn outfit hid out there to jump us? We better drift, boss!"

"Michaels with *him?*" Todd laughed. "Hell, don't you know ol' pewee Mike's done run him off the place two, three times?"

"Hell, then," grunted Chink, "that jumpin' jack ain't gonna follow us. He ain't gonna——"

"He's got eyes, ain't he? An' a tongue to talk with? Come on with me, Chink, an' purty soon he won't have!"

Sullenly Chink whirled his horse around to follow. Quickly Whitey Smith jumped his horse ahead of Todd's. There was a hard glint in his gray eyes, a cold, half grin on his thinnish lips.

"Hold it, Todd!" He spoke quietly but sharply. "Karr's *my* meat!"

"But you're a new hand here, Whitey. You——"

"Hell, if he takes a notion to run for it an' gits away would you rather he'd recollect seein' you an' Chink, or me? Besides—" he grinned dryly—"Karr's owin' *me,* ain't he? You goin' to beat him out of his chance to pay up?"

TODD scowled at him. He scratched the black haired head under his flat-crowned black sombrero thoughtfully.

Occasional bullets still whined from the rocks down in front of them, but the range was long, even for a good hand with a carbine, and this hombre's shots were growing wilder and wilder.

"You want him, eh?" Todd's eyes wore a crafty look. "All right, feller, go git him. But this ain't no face-slappin' party,

you savvy? Dead men don't twist no tails. If he runs, you ketch him—or else!"

The cold gleam in Whitey Smith's gray eyes was answer enough for Blackie Todd. He would have said it was the look of a killer, cold blooded, deliberate.

As the rump of Whitey Smith's horse joggled out of sight down the steep hill into the junipers, Todd turned to the puncher called Chink with a wide grin.

"Nothin' like keepin' a damn fool or two around to do the dirty work, eh, Chink?"

But it was part of Blackie Todd's system to keep close track of things. After he and Chink had spurred their horses out

of sight across the ridge toward where the others had gone on with the rustled calves, Todd lit down and sneaked back afoot to a good, well hidden vantage point behind a boulder and focussed his field glasses again.

Scattered about the cove were the peeled carcasses of four or five freshly slaughtered cows. Afoot, leading his horse, the carbine back in its boot, Cowboy Detective Karr was going from one to another of the carcasses, looking at them, turning them over, standing beside them, scratching his head in puzzlement. He seemed wholly unaware that one of the men he had been shooting at had dropped back and was heading his way.

Blackie Todd admired the way Whitey went at the job. He wasted no time in sneaking. Speed was the important thing —before this catalogue cowboy might take a notion to light a shuck for safer parts. Todd could glimpse Whitey's approach through shuttling breaks in the juniper timber. It was direct. Todd himself would have figured to pot the man from ambush and come on back, but he found nothing to criticize in the fact that Whitey, apparently, meant to give the greenhorn his chance to a fair and open fight. He broke into the opening at a long lope. His gun spat sharply, once.

Todd grinned to see Detective Karr jump a yard straight up in the air, whirl around and scramble to the saddle like a scared wildcat taking to a tree. But to the rustler's surprise, Karr didn't even have sense enough to run for it. With a wild hand he one-reined his horse around and charged at a joggling gallop straight to meet Whitey Smith. He yelled like a Comanche, and the hand tugging at his six-gun finally brought it out.

Neatly, skillfully Whitey Smith reined up a little, circled and got beyond the other, cutting him off from flight. But even then Todd saw that Smith was waiting to shoot, giving the man his chance to make a fight of it.

Suddenly Karr's six-gun began to boom as he charged. But even through the field glasses Todd could see that it was the wild, futile shooting of a man who either didn't know how to aim, or else was too scared to do it.

THEN he saw Whitey Smith's gun barrel swing up, then level down, gripped in a cool, steady hand. Even before the sound of the report reached his ears, Todd saw Karr sway in the saddle, drop both gun and reins, grab at the saddle horn, miss and lunge heavily to the ground. One boot kicked a little, then, in a huddled lump, he lay still.

Calmly Whitey Smith holstered his gun. His eyes swung around in a circle, scanning the brush. Satisfied, apparently, that no danger lurked therein, he swung down and walked over to the man on the ground. He stooped and rolled him over. He

poked a hand methodically into the blue shirt front, held it there a second, pulled it out, wiped it on the down man's pants.

Still calmly, but without any waste of time, he looped his lass rope over the new boots, swung up and dragged Cowboy Detective Karr to the edge of a shallow arroyo and rolled him in.

He started to remount, then, as if it were an afterthought, he jumped down into the arroyo. For a moment he was down there, out of sight. When he climbed back out, Todd's glasses caught a glint of bright metal, like nickel, in his hand.

When Whitey Smith arrived back at the BXB hangout, coming in late by a roundabout way, lest his tracks lead some possible follower upon the trail of Todd and his men, he showed Todd a four-bit, nickel plated star. On it were engraved the words: "Private Detective."

Whitey's face wore a chilly, sardonic smile.

"It costs a feller to wear such things—sometimes," he remarked, and stuck it back in his pocket.

"By God," said Blackie Todd, "you better drift south, come winter. Cold as your blood is, a mighty light frost would freeze it!"

LATE that afternoon Todd came to Whitey Smith's bunk and shook him awake.

"No ridin' tonight, cowboy, after what happened this morning," he said. "Me an' the rest of the boys are lopin' in for a little social evenin' at the Broadhorn."

"Sure, I figgered we would," yawned Whitey.

"Not you. You got to kinder lay low for a spell till we see what's what. A little friendly rustlin' is one thing, murder's another black horse of a different color. Somebody finds the carcass in that arroyo, they might even persuade the sheriff over here from Paso Borrado. He ain't much of a hand to spit ag'inst the wind on a rustlin' deal, but he might try it on a murder, an' we don't want him nosin' around. We ain't ready for no showdown with them RMD fellers yet, nohow, case they take a notion to ride in all swelled up. So we won't be needin' you. You stay here, savvy!"

Whitey rolled out and began pulling on his boots.

"Think I'll ride in, too, Todd. I kinder like them fancy drinks Stutterin' Ike mixes to go with my solitaire."

"Damn it, *no!*" Todd's voice came back roughly, plumb out loud. At the tone several punchers left off slickin' up and loafed over closer, watching. "I don't want you with us, an' I'm givin' the orders."

"I heard you," said Whitey Smith curtly. Busy with his boots he did not even look up. "Heard you mention 'murder,' too, didn't I? I never hardly liked that word, Mister Todd. I jumped Stutterin' Ike for misusin' it, first day I was in Dos Pasos." He reached for a black string necktie.

The other hombre's big hand reached it first, snatched it away. He laughed, showing white teeth.

"Maybe you didn't hear me, kid. You won't need no necktie tonight. You're stayin' here."

Whitey Smith stood up.

"Get this, Todd," he said softly. "Out on the work I take orders. My goin's an' comin's otherwise, I decide for myself."

"Tough, eh?"

"Maybe you'd call it that. I'll thank you for that neck-string."

The cowboy called Chink let out a snicker. Todd turned his head to scowl at him. As he turned back one hand dropped to his gun. The slight tensing of muscles in Whitey Smith's arm extended visibly to his fingers. His six-gun hung in its holster on a bunk nail, not six inches away.

"A killin'," remarked the younger man as impersonally as if he were discussing some fine point of solitaire play, "ain't always murder."

Todd's right hand quit his gun holt as casually as he could make it. His left

handed Whitey the black string tie. He laughed boisterously, as one who makes a lame joke and has to furnish his own applause.

"Just a damn spoilt kid, ain't you?"

"Sure," said Whitey Smith, putting on the tie. "An' on my way to town."

FROM the doorway under the "Schurtz for Shirts" sign Sam Schurtz watched Blackie Todd and his riders string into town, throng the hitch-rail and stroll into the Broadhorn.

"All right, Villie," he grunted. "I lock up now. Maybe you like run down wisit a vile mit Dodd—an' make acquaintance mit dot cotton-top feller, eh? Don't be long."

Bully Bill Hyatt rose from squatted heels on the sidewalk beside the door, gave Schurtz a squint-eyed grin, and slogged off down the street. He took out his .45 and squinted at it as he went, then shoved it back in the holster carefully.

Whitey Smith was already seated alone at a small table, playing solitaire. It was a warm evening. The unscreened window giving on an alley at his back was open a few inches from the bottom. Todd and the rest lolled at the bar. Twilight lamplight glinted on busy glassware. Bully Bill gave them a surly howdy and crowded up beside Todd. He drank, slid the empty glass out in front of Todd, his thick fingers clamped around it.

"Todd, take a look at this!" The glass crushed to pieces in his grip. "Sometimes jest takes one big squeeze—all your fingers, Todd—to bust 'em. You oughta try it—now!"

"Bueno," said Todd in a low voice. "Tomorrow night."

"Tonight," growled Hyatt. "No time like the present."

"Tomorrow night," said Todd stubbornly. "Got a sore hand tonight."

His fingers twirled a black mustache tip to point toward Whitey Smith. Then he pulled Hyatt aside and talked to him a moment in a low tone.

In his slow, bullish gait Bill Hyatt rolled over to Whitey's table and bent over it, a thick palm disarranging the cards.

"Schurtz wants to see you, Smith, up at the store."

"I like it here," said the cowboy, raising cold gray eyes. "An' I'll thank you to pull your paw off of these cards!"

FOR once Bully Bill Hyatt's heavy, squint-eyed face registered surprise. He grinned then, but it was not a pleasant looking display.

"Figger you're tough, eh? Well, you ain't deaiin' with no catalogue cowboy now, kid, like the freak you rolled into the arroyo this mornin'—after he'd missed his first shots."

It was Whitey's turn now to show surprise.

"News does get around, don't it?" he smiled.

"Murder," Hyatt spoke slowly, calculatingly, "gits itself heard of—an' might even make trouble, unless a feller's got the right friends backin' him. You better come on up to the store. The postmaster might have some mail for you."

"You call it murder?" Whitey's voice remained cool and casual. "You might kinder have your loop jangled, Mister Hyatt. That's a word I don't like. Suppose you ask Todd what he saw through the glasses. An' once more, I'll thank you to get off of my cards."

It had been some years since Bully Bill Hyatt's messages from Dos Pasos' leading citizen, Sowbelly Sam Schurtz, had been met with argument, much less cool unconcern. Reluctantly Hyatt moved his hand back from the cards. It was his right hand—and Hyatt was right-handed with his gun. The hand swung at his side. His voice rumbled threateningly, like a bull's.

"Maybe you didn't hear me, kid. The Boss says come up to the store."

Whitey shoved back a little in his chair. His face was expressionless, except for a strange, cold humor in the eyes.

"I've never met Mr. Schurtz personally,

I believe. Doubtless a very pleasant gentleman—but since when is he my boss, Hyatt?"

Todd and the others were silent now, watching, listening.

"Excuse me," said Bully Bill mockingly. "I supposed you knowed. Well, you know now. Come on!"

If the young cowboy was either surprised or impressed his expression failed to show it. He shuffled the deck leisurely. Bully Bill backed up a step to stand clear of the table. The men at the bar drifted with seeming casualness toward the far end of the bar, out of line with the two by the window. They seemed to know intinctively what Bully Bill Hyatt's stance indicated.

As if at the sound of their movement Whitey Smith looked up. Mock surprise lighted his face.

"What? You still here, Hyatt? When you go, you can tell Mr. Schurtz I'll be pleased to make his acquaintance any time he wishes—*here!*"

A stuttery snicker came from behind the bar, quickly smothered into a cough. An oath ripped from the heavy lips of Bully Bill Hyatt. His hand hovered, ready, not six inches out and down from his gun holt.

"Get up, you damned insolent little snipe, before I——"

But the "little snipe" was up, already.

"My powder's dry, Hyatt!" The voice was dry, too, and though neither man had touched his gun yet, the smoky air was suddenly flavored with the sharp presence of imminent death. Two men, eye to eye with death—and each other, ready to draw.

IN THAT split second while they stood thus, the keen black eyes of Todd saw and judged the two quickly. And his judgment was that Bill Hyatt's time had come.

"Look out, Bill, he'll be too fast for ——"

A shot roared out. Only one. And it did not come from the gun of either of the two men standing there. Bill Hyatt's .45 thumped to the floor. His left hand crossed to grip and hold the shattered wrist of his right.

Behind Whitey Smith a fringed gauntlet gripping a smoking gun jerked back through the open window into the dark. Almost instantly there came a jingle of spurs, then the thuddy sound of a horse, put suddenly to the lope.

Bully Bill Hyatt backed up to lean against a table, his bullish shoulders heaving with the vigor of his cursing, blood dripping from his wrist. Whitey Smith's fingers let his .45 slip back down into the

holster. Blackie Todd took one step toward the door.

"Out, boys! We got to git that——"

"Hold it, Todd!" Smith's voice was sharp now, and quick, but it was deadly cold, too. Todd stopped.

"You can believe it or go to hell," Whitey Smith was saying. "That shot from outside was as big a surprise to me as it was to you. But I'm tellin' you—it saved this hombre's life, not mine. Anybody present don't like it, however, you can settle it here, with me. Todd? Chink? Billings? Pedro? I'm a-waitin', boys!"

Two or three hands seemed to tense a little, then relax, Todd's among them. Then the big man laughed harshly.

"By God," he said, "we ain't nursemaids to Bill Hyatt, boys. But I'm givin' you some friendly advice, Smith; you keep your tail up thisaway around here, one of these days you'll jump the wrong dog! You savvy?"

"My tail's still up, Todd. Bring on your dog!"

"Forget it, kid!" Blackie Todd's voice tried to sound genial. "Jest a little friendly

warnin', that's all. Come on an' have a drink!"

"No, thanks," said Whitey Smith crisply. "Somebody better be fixin' up this hombre's arm. I've got a solitaire game I want to play out, if——"

AT THE swings a floor board creaked heavily. With ponderous haste the fat figure of Sam Schurtz bulged in. A man with a gun lolled in behind him.

"Chentlemen! Chentlemen!" He rolled the dead cigar in his lips sternly. "Villie! You t'ink I vait on you all night? Shootings, eh? Vat goes on here?"

"J-j—just a l-l-little f-fuh-fuh-riendly disagreement, M-m-muh-mister Schurtz," began Stuttering Ike. "S-s—some-b-b-body m-m-mentioned m-m-muh-murder, an'——"

"Look here, Sowbelly," Bill Hyatt spoke up over the wound Chink was bandaging with a bandanna, chin-pointing at Whitey Smith who sat at his table again, starting a new game of solitaire, "this damn little snipe says to hell with comin' up to the store. He goes for his gun an' I give him a fair break to draw it, an' somebody else plugs me. By God, I aim to know who an'——"

"Villie!" Somehow, out of that soft mass of flesh Sam Schurtz's voice came no longer like the voice of a fat, good-humored storekeeper. In it was a hard, sinister authority. "Villie! Todd! Ve have no more dis qvarreling, dis gun fight, you understand? You dink I pay you to stir up monkey-business! You, at de table dere! Your name iss Schmidt? I vant to talk to you, young man!"

Schurtz's piggy eyes narrowed in a look of sharp appraisal. Tough young men, reasonably inclined, he might find useful in his business—future if not present. Whitey Smith looked up with a thin grin.

"Talk away," he said. "Only I've got a word to say to Todd first. Todd, it's ten seconds till nine o'clock. By nine I'll have my belly full of this outfit. In other words, at nine, figger I've quit."

"Qvittin'?" Sowbelly rubbed his fat hands. His voice was purring again now. "But Mister Schmidt, after the goot job you done today, is no time to qvit! You an' Dodd git togedder on the pay, eh? He could raise the wages. Or maybe—" his gurgly tone thinned down a little—"maybe you like better to talk mit dot sheriff at Paso Borrado about it, eh? No, my poy, I t'ink—*himmel!*"

Through the swings, grimy faced, disheveled, a great dirty bandage swathed around his head, left arm in a sling, walking groggily, stepped a tall man in cowboy rig that, for all its dirt, had not been many weeks out of the package. But even so, Cowboy Detective Kenneth Karr, whom Todd had seen Whitey drag into an arroyo and leave for the buzzards, had not lost all his swagger. They stared at him, all of them, their jaws sagging with surprise. Stuttering Ike stood as if paralyzed, the whiskey glass he was wiping held up on two fingers. With a swift, startled looking movement Whitey Smith snapped to his feet, upsetting the table in his haste. He backed against the wall.

Todd's hand dropped to his gun. Then when he saw that Karr's right hand held a .45 cocked, and that the man was paying no attention to any of them but Whitey Smith, he withdrew it, waiting. For all his grotesque garb, his shaky walk, there was a deadly look in Karr's eyes, a snarl on his lips.

And he was heading straight toward Whitey Smith.

"Hold it, boys," said Todd in a low tone. "Let 'em kill each other—then if they don't——"

AS HE advanced Karr's snarl grew to words. Hoarse, croaking words.

"Shoot down a detective in pursuit of his official duty, will you? Leave me to die like a dog, eh? Now I've got you where I want you, you——"

"Don't! Don't shoot! Wait!" For the first time since his first public appearance in Dos Pasos, Whitey Smith's voice was

shrill, unsteady with a tremor that sounded convincingly like fear. He backed up another step as Karr advanced toward him, kicking aside the tables. On the faces of Todd, of Sowbelly Schurtz, of Bully Bill Hyatt, even, appeared slow, satisfied grins, as the hands of the young puncher who had toughed it so brash with them began slowly to go up shoulder high before the menace of Karr's gun.

A yard in front of him Karr paused to gloat, loudly, in gusty, swaggering melodrama.

"Slap my face, eh? Refuse to drink with me! Shoot me down like a dog! Now—*go for your gun!*"

Like a streak of lightning Whitey Smith's hands came down. Like a second streak of the same, Cowboy Detective Karr whirled and stood beside him. Together, steady as sure death, they looked levelly across the tumbled tables. Karr's gun was out, ready. Whitey Smith's still undrawn.

"It's all up, boys!" The voice of Cowboy Detective Karr was no longer blustery, nor even harsh with the gloating croak of vengeance. It was calm, hard, quiet, deadly—the voice of a man who had stood both before and behind the old equalizer often enough to know the footing.

On the boyish face of Whitey Smith a grin grew slowly, but there was no humor in either what he said, nor how he said it.

"It's an arrest, Todd—all of you—for cattle stealing! Put 'em up! The show's over! Quick! My gun hand's gittin' anxious."

But the show wasn't over. In the flash that they saw how they had been duped, the courage of trapped wolves flared in Todd and his men. Cursing they went for their guns. And in swift deadly silence, Whitey Smith went for his.

With a squall of fear that sounded even above the roar of the shooting the leading citizen of Dos Pasos, caught in the sucker net with his own school of hired renegades, made a ponderous lunge for the swing doors. But the frantic surge of his big fat body netted him no gain. For the doors swung open to meet him. For the first time in years his fat lips lost hold on their dead cigar as the barrel of Foreman Michaels' six-gun cracked smartly upon his head.

From behind the waspish little foreman there swarmed a trio of his cowhands, shooting as they came. Through the window leaped another—RMD riders, all, eager to be in at the finish. Only four of the nine—all that Michaels had been able to get together on the short notice of Cowboy Detective Karr's hurried call that the stage was set and waiting. And even then, until this moment, doubtful of his urgent request to be here by nine with their powder dry.

IT WAS seven against fifteen, and the blackening cloud of gun-smoke against them all, there in the Broadhorn. But of the seven, two were cool and calm and deadly. Two fought as pardners, side by side, as they had fought north in Montana, west in Oregon, east in Oklahoma many a time before. That one of them had recently lost his cowboy tan in a K. C. hospital while recovering from a rustler's bullet, that he now wore cheap unaccustomed, mail order rigging, that his head was bandaged heavily for wounds that did not exist, made no matter. His gun hand was working. And so was that of the blond youngster who had lately slapped his face.

What their real names were was now of no consequence. Together Cowboy Detective Kenneth Karr and the tow-head who called himself Whitey Smith threw hot lead that soon brought the rustlers of the RMD range to taw. Cowboy Detective Karr bled from a wound that was real, now, and the cottony fuzz on Whitey Smith's cheek was singed from the near-passing of hot lead. But of the BXB renegades, four would swing long loops no more, and Todd was on the floor with a broken leg, howling surrender. Two were gone, galloping into the night, with the

fear of God at their tails. And the rest, their main Big Auger quivering his huge bulk among them, stood lined against the wall, their hands in the air.

There were wounds among the RMD men, too, but none was down.

Waspish little Foreman Michaels stood before Sam Schurtz, nursing a shot finger.

"Goin' to force us to sell to you, was you, Sowbelly—shippin' stolen cowhides with one hand an' postmasterin' my mail with the other! By God, I oughta——"

"Proof! Proof! Noddings you can prove!" Miraculously unshot, Sowbelly Sam Schurtz was asserting himself again. But it was no use.

"Todd himself showed me the cache for them stolen hides, Michaels," said the youngster who called himself Whitey Smith. "An' I watched Schurtz an' his plug-ugly bodyguard—Hyatt, there, with the shot hand—overseein' the works. Bribin' the hide inspector an' shippin' 'em out by the carload, an' if that ain't proof enough—you tell 'em, Mister Cowboy Detective Karr!"

Karr grinned, rolling a smoke. He fished a loose-leaf notebook from his pocket. On each page was a black smear, a fine-lined print of something. Whitey Smith fished out a similar book.

"Calf nose-prints, boys," Karr grinned. "Recollect that day you spooked a feller off from ropin' calves, Jimpson? Maybe you took note them calves had dirty noses? I'd jest been printin' 'em. So I done some ridge-top signalin', an' my pardner here, runnin' with the wild bunch, he seen to it that some of these same calves got rustled. Then he snook out an' taken their prints —after Todd had 'em all branded an' hid out safe, in them southwest draws. Well, it's plumb simple. Ever' calf's got his own nose print pattern, same as a man's fingers. Proof? We'll jest show the jury my set of prints—an' his. Plenty of 'em's off the same calf. What the hell, didn't I tell you I was the curly wolf of Cowboy Detectives?"

BLACKIE TODD groaned. "I'll be double damned to hell! We oughta hang by the toes for the buzzards to peck at, lettin' you frame us like that! Why double damn it, I——"

"By the neck, Todd," put in Foreman Michaels grimly, "if the court of law don't stand up to the taw line."

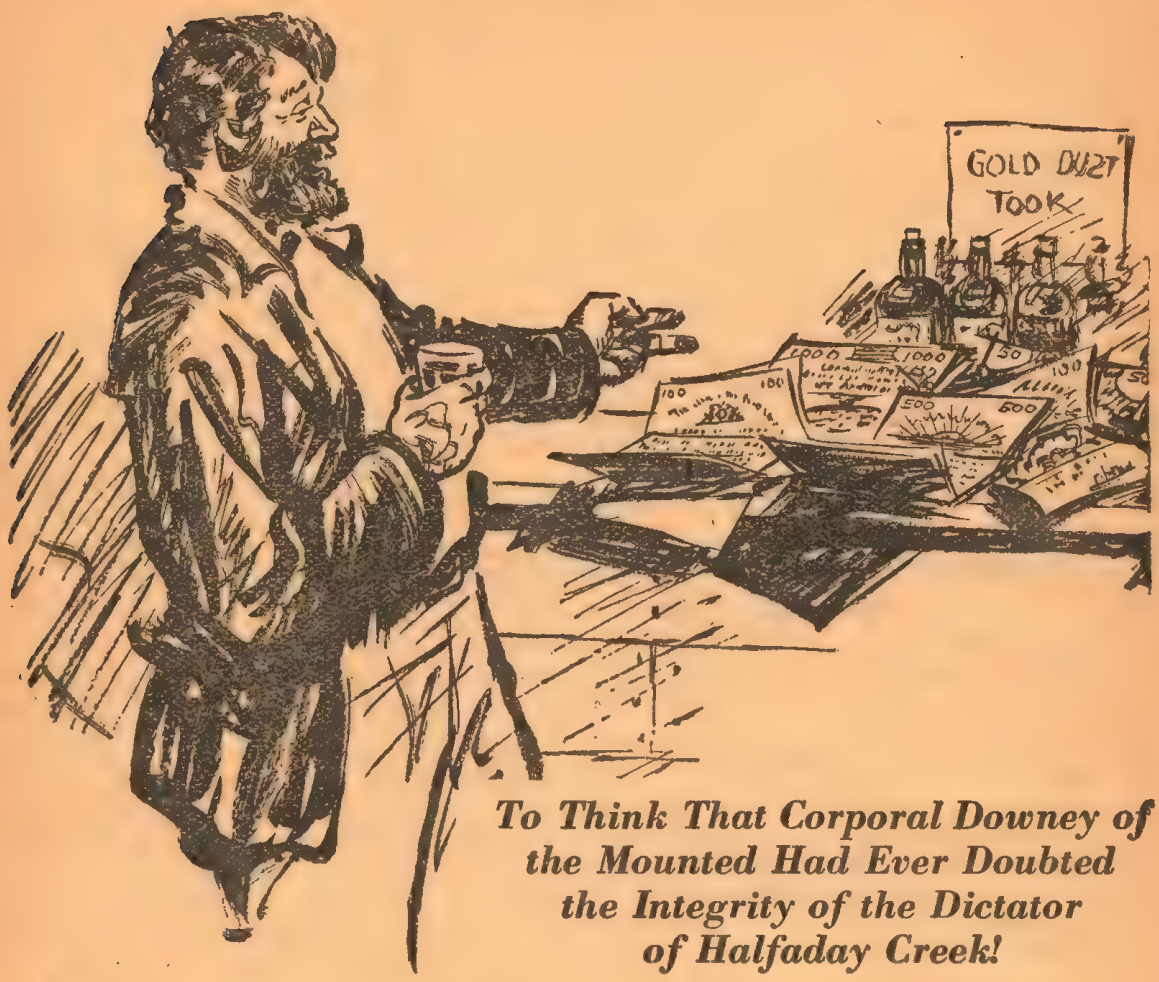
Bully Bill Hyatt still looked dazed.

"Who the hell shot me?" he growled. "Damn his cowardly soul, I'd have killed this snipe, only——"

"Yeah?" Cowboy Detective Karr's drawl sounded now quite different from the braggart bellowing with which he had first announced himself in the Broadhorn. "The White Haired Boy don't miss, feller, except when he's 'murderin'' me! Chance of you killin' him ain't why I plugged your hand through the window. You see, Todd, while you watched Whitey 'murderin'' me this mornin' him an' me was actually layin' out this work for tonight—to git ever'body here at nine, an' settle up with you rustlin' black hats, all around. I'f I'd have let him kill you, Hyatt, it would have started the ruckus a few minutes too soon. He was augurin' you so as Schurtz would maybe come hisself. But what ails Whitey, he shore loves a fight. So I jest riz up outside an' plugged your hand myownself. I knowed Whitey wouldn't never finish his draw against a man with his gun hand ruint. That'd be murder, sure 'nough!"

"M-m-muh-murder!" Stuttering Ike's bald pate rose cautiously from behind the bar. "M-m-m-muh-murder is a-a w-w-w-wuh-word ol'-ol' Wh-wh-whu, y'know this feller Smith, he d-d-duh-don't much like! W-w-wuh-will all y-you hon-hon-honest c-c-cuh-cuh, damn it, cowboys step up for a d-d-drink?"

Black John Buys Some



To Think That Corporal Downey of the Mounted Had Ever Doubted the Integrity of the Dictator of Halfaday Creek!

OLD CUSH, proprietor of Cushing's Fort, the combined trading post and saloon that served the little community of outlawed men that had sprung up on Halfaday Creek, close against the Yukon-Alaska borderline, set out a bottle, a leather dice box, and two glasses as Black John Smith entered the door and advanced to the bar.

"There was a piece in the paper you fetched up from Dawson," he began, as the other picked up the dice box, "that says where some army officer, over there in the Phillipyne Islands, took a common soldier er two along with him, an' set out fer to capture this here Aguinaldo."

"I don't know nothin' about no Aguinaldo," replied Black John, casting the dice, "but there's three fives to beat in one."

"Yeah," assented Cush, returning the dice to the box and spreading them on the bar with a flourish, "an' there's three sixes that does it. Aguinaldo, he's the nigger General that's fightin' the U. S. over there in them islands. An' there's four deuces right back at you. See what yer law of averages says about that!"

Black John cast the dice, scowled at the pair of fours that showed, and filled his glass, as Cush made the proper notation in his book. "What," he asked, "would the U. S. Army be wantin' with a General of niggers?"

"Well—hell! If they ketched their General, they could take him down an' choke

BONDS By JAMES B. HENDRYX

Author of the Halfaday Creek Stories

him, er somethin', till he ordered the niggers to quit fightin'. Then that would end the war."

"Why would the Army want to end a war? Cripes! If it wasn't fer wars, they wouldn't have no job."

"That's so," admitted Cush, "why would they? Maybe they figger they've got him about licked, er somethin', an' want to tip him off to start another one. But anyhow, it took a lot of guts fer this fella to go off in them jungles which is full of them head-huntin' niggers—an' white man's heads figgered as blue chips among 'em—an' try to pinch off their General. I feel kind of sorry fer him."

"Sorry hell!" exclaimed Black John. "What do you want to feel sorry fer him fer? He's doin' what he wants to, ain't he? There didn't no one tell him to go, did they? It was his own idee. You kin bet that his superior officers never sent him on no sech a fool trip. An' if a man's workin' on an idee, no matter what the odds is agin him, he's happy. If you want to feel sorry, why the hell don't you feel sorry for them common soldiers he took along with him? I'll bet they ain't happy—by a damn sight!"

"The papers says where they've been gone quite a while now—an' they ain't come back. I still claim it took a lot of guts."

"I ain't deridin' his guts, none," agreed Black John. "But if a man lets his guts run away with his brains—that ain't so good neither. Their heads is prob'ly stickin' up on poles somewheres, right now."

ONE-ARMED JOHN was in a day or so back," said Cush, changing the subject, "an' he says how them three fellas that moved into Olson's old shack, down the crick, had went."

"Yeah," said Black John. "I looked in there when I come up from Dawson, an' I seen there wasn't no one there. It's prob'ly jest as well. I never figgered they was no ornament to the crick."

"By the way, John, did you do any good on yer prospectin' trip?"

"Oh—about so-so. I done a little better'n wages. Nothin' to brag of."

"Look who's comin' up from the landin'," exclaimed Cush. "Damn if it ain't Corporal Downey! Wonder what he's doin' on Halfaday? Mebbe he's up after them three we was jest talkin' about."

"Might be, at that," agreed Black John, as he turned to greet the young officer of the Northwest Mounted Police, who was entering the door.

"Hello, Downey! Me an' Cush was jest talkin' about you! Is it, mebbe, some criminal matter that brings you amongst us? Er is this jest a neighborly call? Belly up. Cush is buyin' a drink."

"It's a kinda of a hurry-up case," replied Downey, filling the glass that Old Cush placed before him. "There was a big express train robbery down in Alberta, an' they seem to think that the robbers might of hit north. The Inspector sent me up the White, with orders to go on up the Dalton Trail as far as the detachment, an' then swing in here an' report back to Dawson."

"You got a description of the robbers?" asked Black John.

"No, all we know is that there's two of 'em, an' they might be headed north." He paused and grinned. "Any two fellows I meet on the trail headed inside are apt to get their packs searched for concealed weapons; if I should accidentally stumble onto any bonds, of course, I'd gather 'em in."

"Bonds, eh? Was there an important amount of 'em?"

"Yeah—damned important. Half a million dollars worth. They think the robbers got the wrong pouch. There was a heavy shipment of currency on the train, too. But somehow, they overlooked it an' took the bonds. It was a special shipment, to cover a deal involvin' the merger of the West Coast an' the Alaska-Pacific Steamship lines. It come through from England."

"Well, it was insured, wasn't it?"

"Yes, it was insured, all right. But that ain't the half of it—if these bonds ain't located within ninety days, the merger deal is off, an' the London Syndicate that's interested will stand to lose a couple of millions in profits. Sir Henry Billson, their representative, is sure hell-bent to get them bonds back. It's important enough so we sent out special patrols."

"But no one could cash them bonds, even if they had 'em, could they? Hell—they're all numbered, er somethin', ain't they?"

"Sure they are, but the robbers might get away with it, at that. If they hit south an' crossed into the States, there's plenty of fences that handle hot bonds. They'd have to let go of 'em at a loss on their face value—but they could get rid of 'em, all right. It's the time element in this deal that makes Sir Henry so anxious to get 'em back. Of course, whoever showed up with one of 'em would be picked up for a suspected robber."

"Yeah," agreed Black John. "When was this here event pulled off?"

"Three weeks ago—jest long enough so they could be nosin' into the Yukon country, if they hurried."

"H-u-u-m, that would be about the time I was down to Dawson, wouldn't it?"

"Yup, jest about," agreed Downey. "Has anyone showed up on Halfaday? I sure wish you'd help me out on this case, John. Practically the whole force is huntin' 'm, an' believe me, I'd like to be the one that picked 'em up. Besides, they'd ort to be caught, anyhow. They killed the express

messenger, an'—it's the rope fer 'em if they're caught."

BLACK JOHN nodded. "You might's well go on back to Dawson," he said. "There ain't no new faces on Halfaday. I give you my word, Downey, that if them bonds shows up on the crick, you'll git 'em. You'll have to take your own chances on pickin' up the robbers, though. It would probably serve 'em right to git caught, at that. I don't believe in murderin' a man fer the purpose of robbery. It don't somehow seem right."

Corporal Downey smiled a tight-lipped smile. "I'm takin' you at your word, John," he said. "Without havin' any description of the robbers, I know damn well that if they're already on Halfaday, they've had time to cache the stuff, an' I'd never find it. I know that if the bonds showed up on the crick, you'll locate 'em, an' I believe you'll deliver 'em to me. I ain't forgot that there's been times when

you've turned over big sums of cash to me, that you could jest as well kept for yourself—like the money from that Boston bank robbery, an' that dust Monty had hid in the shaft, behind them dead men, that time. But there's been other times when I've sort of had my suspicions that——" Downey paused, and the grin widened.

"Well, cripes," interrupted Black John, his keen blue eyes twinkling above the heavy black beard, "you can't expect to git all the breaks, Downey! A horse apiece is fair play, as the Good Book says. The Mounted, bein' what it is, I hold that it's bad ethics to commit practically any crime at all on this side of the line. An' you've got to remember, Downey—you can't hang a man on suspicion."

"You an' yer ethics!" grinned the corporal. "We've hung men with better ethics than yours! Drink up, I'm buyin' one, an' then I'll be movin' along."

"Yeah, mebbe you have," laughed Black John. "But you've always ketched 'em at somethin' before you done it. Here's mud in yer eye. Up here on Halfaday you'll always find us willin' to work hand in glove with the police. Ain't that so, Cush?"

"Oh, shore," agreed the somber-faced proprietor. "We aim to keep the crick moral in spite of hell."

BLACK JOHN followed Downey down to the landing. "By the way," he asked, "did you fellas grab off either one of them kidnappers before they got outside? I've kind of wondered if that last one ever ketched up with his pardner—the one that had the dough?"

"No," replied Downey, "we didn't. They'll be picked up, though, as soon as they begin to spend that money. We took the numbers of all those bills, an' they've gone out over the new telegraph wire to every police force in Canada, an' the States, too. An' not only that, the banks have got the numbers, too."

"Well, well, so they've got the wire through, at last, eh? Handy thing fer you fellas, ain't it—that telegraph?"

"You bet it is! That's how we got word of this bond robbery. Hadn't been fer the wire, we prob'ly wouldn't have heard about it yet."

"Well, so long, Downey. Don't you worry about them bonds. If them fellas hit north, the chances is they'll show up on Halfaday. Most of them damn miscreants does, fer some reason er other. We don't mind that, as long as they stay moral. But the trouble with the bulk of 'em—there ain't no steadfastness about their morality. It's apt to be spread on kind

of thin—an' when it begins to wear through, they're out of luck."

II

IS THIS Cushing's Fort, on Halfaday Creek?" asked a voice from the doorway, one morning ten days after the departure of Corporal Downey.

"Both guesses is right," replied Black John, as he and Old Cush eyed the pack-laden men who advanced to the bar.

"We're glad to git here," said one of them wearily, as he wriggled from his straps and let his pack fall to the floor. "We've had a hell of a trip."

"Sech gladness might er might not be mutual," Black John retorted. "Jest reach in the name-can yonder, an' help yerselves to a couple of names."

"Name-can?" queried the other, as he too divested himself of his pack. "What the hell's a name-can?"

"It's a simple device me an' Cush here thought up for to furnish good workable names to folks that comes in here lyin' about their own. Most folks that comes bustin' in on us claims their name is John Smith, which would be all right with us, if it didn't lead to confusion."

The larger of the two men grinned. "I git you," he said, and reaching into the can withdrew a slip of paper and read off the name: "Eli Fulton."

The other man drew a slip and read, "Robert Whitney."

Black John nodded approval. "The party back of the bar is Old Cush hisself an' my name's John Smith," he announced. "I'm mostly called Black John, owin' to the fact that my whiskers turned out to be that color." He glanced toward the proprietor, who stood behind the bar, twisting an end of his long yellow mustache. "Cush, I want you should meet my old friends, Eli and Bob."

"The house is buyin' one," announced Cush, by way of acknowledging the introduction.

"I'll have some coneyack," said Whitney, eyeing the bottles on the back bar.

"You might think you will, but you won't," replied Cush evenly. "Them names is on them bottles jest to make 'em look fancy. The licker in all of 'em is drawed out of the same bar'l. It's whiskey. An' if it ain't good enough fer you, you kin go dry. Sometime some damn shorthorn is goin' to come prancin' up here demandin' beer—an' when he does, he's goin' to git a bung-starter right plumb between the eyes."

"Oh, hell—whiskey's all right with me," the man hastened to explain. "I seen that bottle with 'coneyack' on it, an' I thought I'd try a little jest fer a change."

"Changin' licker's hard on a man's guts," opined Cush, "besides bein' a damn nuisance fer a bartender. What I claim, if a man can't git along with whiskey, he'd ort to stay to home an' rig him up a sugar tit."

THE liquor was downed, and, ordering another round, Fulton turned to Black John. "So you're Black John Smith, eh? We heard about you an' Cushing's Fort down on the Yukon. Some fellers was tellin' us how you boys was all outlaws up here—an' how the police don't never dare to stick their nose on Halfaday Crick. We was headin' fer the Klondike, till we run onto these fellers at Selkirk. An' when they told us about this crick, we decided to come on up here. We thought it might suit us better than down around Dawson."

"Well, it might, at that," agreed Black John, ordering a round of drinks. "It's true that most of us here on Halfaday is outlawed, fer one reason er another, but it ain't true that the police don't dare show up here. The fella you was talkin' with must of been a chechako, er he'd knowed damn well that the Mounted would dare to go anywhere they wanted to, an' it would be jest too damn bad fer anyone that tried to stop 'em. The facts is, the police don't bother us none up here—not because they don't dare to, but because there ain't any

reason they should. Me an' Cush, here, we try to keep the crick moral—an' all the rest of the boys backs us up in it, by votin' a hangin' onto anyone that would commit any crime on the crick that would fetch in the police. Keep a crick free of crime, an' the police will let it alone."

"That's good common sense," approved the man. "But what do you fellers do up here?"

"We work," replied Black John. "There ain't nothin' like good honest toil to keep a man out of mischeef. Cush, here, he runs the saloon an' tradin' post—an' all the rest of us works on our claims."

"You mean, dig fer gold?"

"Yeah—that's about the only enterprise that's flourished, so far, on the crick."

"We don't know nothin' about gold diggin'," protested Whitney, calling for a round of drinks.

"It ain't no complicated business to learn," said Black John. "You stake out a claim, an' then you dig. You sink a shaft, an' throw the gravel onto a dump, and then sluice out the dump. We kin show you about riggin' up a windlass, an' a sluice."

BLACK JOHN noted that the man was beginning to show the effects of his liquor, and he ordered another round. As Whitney refilled his glass, he scowled. "I didn't come up here to dig in the ground like a damn badger," he said. "From what we heard about the gold camps, a man could have a hell of a good time, an' clean up good money at poker, an' roulette, an' faro—provided he had a stake to start with."

Black John nodded. "Yeah, I guess some of 'em's doin' it down around Dawson. But Halfaday ain't that kind of a camp."

"I don't notice you breakin' yer back none with no shovel," retorted the man.

Black John took no offence. "I took a day off," he explained. "I got up this mornin' with a bellyache, an' I figgered a little licker would do it good."

"Accordin' to what we heard from them fellers down on the Yukon, there's plenty of money on Halfaday—gold an' paper money, too. They claim that every onct in so often you go down to Dawson with a hull damn boatload of gold an' trade it in fer bills. They said you had plenty—an' Cush, too. They claimed that jest about everyone on the crick was well fixed."

Black John, himself, was obviously beginning to feel his liquor, so that Old Cush eyed him quizzically as he thumped the bar with his fist, and bellowed for another round. "Oh, shore!" he boasted. "Take us per capita, an' we're a damn rich crick! I've got plenty of dust an' bills, too! Plenty—an' more than a plenty fer all my needs an' requirements. But I'm a fly in my ointment, as the Good Book says—meanin' that I'm all bogged down in my own wealth. What good does it do a man to have a lot of gold, an' a lot of bills? No good whatever! Not a damn bit of good—if they ain't earnin' him nothin'. Gold an' bills cached away in holes in the rocks, an' in iron safes ain't producin' a man nothin'! They don't draw no interest. That's the trouble with Halfaday, gents—a man's got to keep toilin' away, no matter how much money he's got, er he ain't earnin' nothin'. Take it now in cities an' places like that, if a man's got money, he don't never have to work. No sir—he kin set back an' take life easy, an' let his money work fer him. He kin buy store buildin's an' houses, an' rent 'em out to folks. He kin put his money in a bank an' let it draw interest, er he kin buy stock in some company, an' drag down dividends, er he could buy bonds, an' live like a king on the interest of 'em. But here on Halfaday, we're cut off from all them advantages. I feel sorry fer us, gents. Yes, sir, much as we'd like to have you settle amongst us, I can't see no future in it fer you. You'd jest have to go on diggin' out dust, that you ain't got no use fer when you git it dug." He appealed to Cush, who stood eyeing him with a disapproving frown. "Am I right, my dear friend—er am I wrong?"

"Yer soused," growled Cush, "an' talkin' like a damn fool."

"Oh, I don't know," interrupted Fulton, ordering a round of drinks. "There's a hell of a lot of good common sense in what he says. If a man's got money he's out of luck if he can't set it to workin' fer him. Money ain't no good layin' around idle. Like he says, if he could invest it in good stock, er bonds—'specially bonds. They're safer, an' they don't fluctuate, like stocks does. Good sound bonds is damn good property."

"You said it, ol' pal!" agreed Black John, throwing an arm about the man's shoulder. "Don't pay no 'tenshun to Cush. I know a smart man when I she one. Yer smart, 'cause yer smart enough to know I'm smart, an' that makes two of us. It's onearned increments that's the bane of—of—of the financial strucher of—of civilization—you know that, 'cause yer smart—an' I know it—but, Cush—he don't even know what we're talkin' about. He's good fella—Cush is—but he ain't smart—an' he never will be. Fill 'em up again, Cush! An' listen around a while, an' mebbe you'll git smart, too. Thish man's right—if I could buy some bonds, I'd be happy."

THE meaning look that passed between the two strangers at Black John's statement was not lost on Old Cush, whose frown deepened at Fulton's next words:

"Fact is," he said, casually, "we've got a few gilt-edged bonds with us that we might part with fer ready cash."

Black John regarded the man owlishly: "Wha's a difference if a bond's got gilt edges? It's wha's on the flat side of a bond that counts—not wha's on the edges of it. You think I'm a sucker, eh? Think you kin sell me some bonds because it's got fancy edges, eh?"

Fulton laughed good naturedly, and ordered a round of drinks. "You don't quite git me," he explained. "What I meant—gilt-edged—was jest a way us bond salesmen has of sayin' a bond is A Number One. Anything that's an awful good buy, we say it's gilt-edged. Like a deck of cards—the gilt-edged ones is the best cards; they cost the most, an' they're worth more."

"Yeah," agreed Black John cagily. "But there's jest as many aces in a cheap deck. Like I was tellin' you—it's what's on the flat of 'em that counts, not the edges."

"You're right," agreed the man, "an' our bonds have got the goods on the flat of 'em—you kin bet on that. Hell—you don't suppose we'd try to unload no phony bonds on anyone, do you? Not with the laws what they be, we wouldn't. The Gover'ment checks up on all bonds before they'll let 'em be offered fer sale. Hell's fire, a man could go to jail fer tryin' to unload phony bonds!"

"They ort to, too," acquiesced Black John solemnly. "It would be one of the

worst forms of skullduggery—an' on Halfaday it would be hangable. So you two is bond salesmen, eh? Funny place fer bond salesmen to come. I'd think they'd stick around cities, where there's more folks to sell bonds to."

THAT'S where yer wrong," replied the man. "The cities is all full of bond salesmen. The competition's fierce. Me an' my pardner, here, we figgered this way—here's them gold camps, we says, up north, where they've got plenty of gold and nowheres to invest it—jest like you was sayin' yerself. We figgers that if we was to

take a bunch of bonds up there, we could sell 'em easy, 'cause there wouldn't be no competition, an' plenty of gold an' money jest itchin' to be invested in good solid securities, where it would be workin' fer a man, an' not layin' around idle—jest like you was tellin' us."

"That's right," agreed Black John. "Men like us is smart 'nough to see them things, an' grab the bull by the horns before the horse is stole, as the Good Book says. But how come you showed up on Halfaday? Dawson's a bigger camp. There's lots of dust in Dawson."

"We're goin' on to Dawson," replied the man. "We jest stopped in here 'cause we heard, from them fellas at Selkirk, that you boys had a lot of dust an' bills on hand, an' we figgered to give you a chanct to invest it, if you wanted to. We figgered we'd be doin' you boys a favor, besides doin' some business fer ourselves, to boot."

"Tha's right," agreed Black John. "What's bonds worth, a dozen? I might buy some."

"They ain't sold by the dozen," grinned the man. "Each bond is sold separate—accordin' to what it's worth. Like—a thousan', er five thousan', er ten thousan'. Each one has got the amount printed onto it, an' what company issued it, an' what's backin' it, in the way of property—an' all that stuff. It's all printed right on the bond where you kin read it yourself before you buy it. There ain't no chanct fer a fake."

Black John seemed to lose interest. "I guess you boys better go on down to Dawson," he said. "I wouldn't care to piffle around buyin' bonds one to a time. An' read each one out before I bought it. Hell, if I want to read, we've got books on Halfaday—Cush, here, has got a Bible, an' I've got a law book damn near a foot thick. You prob'l ain't got enough bonds to int'rest me, nohow. If you had a job lot I could pick up reasonable, I might talk to you."

Fulton smiled. "We've got half a million dollars' worth," he said. "Would that interest you any?"

"Half a million dollars!" exclaimed Black John. "Cripes—them bonds runs up into figgers! Trot 'em out—let's look 'em over."

AS THE two men stooped to open their packs, Old Cush, by means of frantic head-shaking, and frowning grimaces, sought to dissuade the huge man from dealing with the strangers. But his efforts were futile, and presently the bar was decorated with an assortment of official looking documents in green, and yellow, and brown.

"Look a there, Cush!" exclaimed Black John, indicating the array with a wave of his hand. "Ain't them the purtyest layout of bonds you ever seen? Cripes—anyone could tell, jest by lookin' at 'em that there ain't nothin' phony about them bonds. They're the real article. You better git in on this, Cush. I'm goin' to take a bunch of them yeller ones. They look important as hell!"

"I wouldn't have nothin' to do with 'em," growled Cush. "An' if you've got any sense, you won't either."

"There you go," exclaimed the big man impatiently. "Always tryin' to obstruct civilization! If I was as gloomy minded as what you be, I'd of strangled myself at birth, an' saved a whole lifetime of misery! Why, jest lookin' at all that there wealth spread out on the bar makes me feel happy. Fill 'em up again—an' then open up the shafe, Cush! I'm a-goin' to make an investment."

Old Cush's lips straightened into a firm white line beneath his yellow mustache, as he reached beneath the bar and picked up the bung-starter, which he balanced in his hand with a certain devoted regard, as he eyed Black John through narrowed lids.

"I ain't openin' no safe—an' you ain't buyin' no bonds," he announced in a flat, cold tone. "Not with no dust er money you've got in that safe, you ain't. Yer licker's went back on you today, John. Yer

drunker'n a fool, right now. It ain't none of my business how drunk you git, but when it comes to blowin' all yer money into a lot of junk like that, I'm agin it. An' if you go makin' a move to open the safe, yerself, I'll knock you cold as a wedge with this bung-starter—an' when you come to, you'll thank me."

BLACK JOHN'S brows drew into a frown as he eyed the determined figure that stood behind the bar. Surprise was mingled with wholesome respect, as his eyes dropped from the other's face to the weapon that he fondled most caressingly. Long years of professional practise had made Old Cush a past master in the technique of the bung-starter, and Black John had seen too many demonstrations of his skill on the skulls of obstreperous customers, to ask for any of it on his own account. He sought, by means of soft words, to win the other over.

"Aw, lishen, Cus', I ain' drunk. I know damn well I ain'! Cripes—I couldn't talk buishness—businish, if I was drunk, could I? Course I couldn't. C'm on—open up the shafe, like a good fella, and lemme have some money. You wouldn' she all them good bonds go to waste, would you? They'd look as important as hell in the shafe, along with the dust an' bills."

"They ain't goin' to look important in this safe," replied Cush obstinately, "an' you ain't goin' to git no money out of it, neither."

The big man switched to bluff and bluster. "Why, you damn ol' badger! It's my money I want out of that safe—not yourn. An' I'm entitled to it, too. Open up, now—er damn if I don't climb the bar an' git it!"

"You'll sleep a while before you do," replied Cush dryly, waggling the bung-starter a bit as he rolled back his sleeve suggestively.

Black John assumed an air of outraged dignity. Ignoring Cush, he turned to the others. "It's pitiful, gents," he said, "how, in the hour of need, a man's friends goes back on 'em. Look at him—my pal—standin' there with a bung-starter ready to brain me, jest 'cause I want to draw a little of my own money out of his shafe! But, gents, to hell wish him! Yesher—to hell wish him an' his shafe, too! I got some spare change to buy bonds wish. Got it right over to my cabin. You wait right here, gents, an' I'll go git it. Firs' though, we'll have a li'l drink all 'roun'. Cush shays I'm drunk—hell, I'll shtart in an' show'm how to git drunk! An' I'll buy all yer damn bonds, to boot. I know a businish man when I she one—an' I'm him. I c'n tell it jest by lookin' in the glash. Ain' I a bushiness man?"

"Sure you are!" exclaimed Fulton, turning to Cush. "Fill 'em up, barkeep. I'm buyin' this one. He's all right—let him alone."

"I don't give a damn how drunk he gits," said Cush, "an' I guess he won't buy no hell of a lot of bonds with what cash he's got in his cabin. Let him blow it, if he wants to—but he don't get a damn cent out of the safe."

"Don' need no money out of yer damn shafe!" retorted Black John, swallowing his liquor. "Got plenty over to my cabin. You wait an' she!"

CROSSING the floor unsteadily, Black John disappeared to return a few minutes later with a bulky package done up in brown paper. Setting the package on the bar, he undid the wrapping, and three pairs of eyes widened in surprise as Old Cush and the two strangers gazed at the neat packets of bills, held together with rubber bands.

"There she ish, gents—jes' a li'l loosh change I keep on me in case I might wan' it. Fifty thousand, in good paper money! Fifty thousan' dollars, gents—bring on yer damn bonds!"

Eagerly the two strangers began sorting over their bonds, and presently Fulton handed Black John several of them. "There you be," he said. "Fifty thousand dollars worth, an' no charge fer accrued interest."

"Fer what?" asked Black John, fumbling the bonds over as he examined them.

"Accrued interest, they call it. You see, them bonds has already earnt some interest sence they was issued, an' it belongs to the one that owns 'em. But we ain't chargin' you fer that. We're sellin' 'em at face value—you keep the interest."

"Shore, thash all right," said Black John, "but all of 'em only adds up to fifty thousan'."

"Well—that's what you claimed you've got there in bills. Fifty thousan' in bonds, fer fifty thousan' in bills—that's fair enough, ain't it—with us throwin' in the interest?"

Black John shook his head. "Nope—that ain't the way I do businesh. Them bills ish real money. Bonds ain' money—they're jes' bonds. I gotta make a profit. Man would be a damn fool to give fifty thousan' in money fer fifty thousan' in bonds."

"Tell you what we'll do—we'll throw in an extry ten thousan'. There's a bargain fer you! Sixty thousan' in A Number One, gilt-edged bonds fer only a lousy fifty thousan' in cash."

"You talk kind of big, don't you? Lousy fifty thousan'! By God, fifty thousan' dollars in cash money ain' lousy—no matter how you look at it. It's important money, an' you'd think so, too, if you'd toiled fer it, like I did!"

"I didn't mean it that way—it was jest a way of speakin', to show you what kind of a bargain you was gittin'."

"Yeah, tha's what I think, too—lousy bargain! Tha's right. Come on agin with them bonds, if you want to do businesh with me!"

"What do you mean?"

"Mean? I mean keep shovin' them bonds over, till I git my money's worth. What you think I mean?"

FULTON frowned. "What kind of a bargain do you expect? We offered to throw in an extry ten thousan'."

"Yeah—an' you ain' started to throw in. Come on—keep 'em comin'."

"Tell you what we'll do—seein' you've got the ready cash handy. We'll sell 'em to you at seventy-five cents on the dollar. There's a bargain for you—seventy-five thousan' in bonds fer fifty thousan' in cash!"

"That's a li'l better—but not nowheres near good enough," replied Black John, shaking his head. "Yer willin'ness to part with 'em cheap, kind of warns me that there's somethin' shady about 'em. The bonds theirselves looks genuine—but yer title to 'em is ondoubtless open to suspicion. They might even be the product of some crime."

"Listen," said Fulton, scowling, "I'll give it to you straight. We ain't reg'lar bond salesmen, like I told you. We got holt of this stuff on a deal that was a little shady. The bonds is good as gold. We figgered we could git rid of 'em fer ready cash up here in the gold country, an' like I told you, we was headin' fer Dawson. But when we heard about here, we come on up, figgerin' that some of you would know how to git rid of 'em, an' we could, mebbe, git a better price than we could in Dawson. Tell you what I'll do—an' it's the best I kin do on 'em. Give me fifty cents on the dollar an' take 'em. At that price mebbe yer friend, here, would go in with you—two hundred an' fifty thousan' fer a half a million in bonds. You double yer money—not to say nothin' about the interest."

"I wouldn't have 'em at no price," said Cush. "Buyin' hot bonds ain't in my line—never was an' never will be."

Black John listened to Cush's dictum with drunken gravity. "Cush is right," he announced. "We might find ourshelf in a hell of a lot of trouble. Guesh I don' wan' none of 'em neither." Deliberately he began to arrange the packets of bills on the brown paper, preparatory to doing them up. "Damn shite better to have fifty thousan' in good honest bills than half a million in bonds that might git you in jail.

Better take 'em on down to Dawson, boys, an' peddle 'em down there."

BOTH strangers were eyeing the money avidly as Black John drew the paper around it.

"Hold on!" Fulton cried. "It's a damn hold-up—but I'll tell you what we'll do! We need the cash, bad. Fifty thousan' is nothin' but chicken feed, side of half a million in bonds—but it's a stake. If the play is runnin' like we hear tell of in Dawson, we kin hit there with fifty thousan' an' clean up a million with the cards. Shove us the money an' take the bonds—all of 'em! Half a million fer fifty thousan'! Ten cents on the dollar is all they're costin' you. You'll make four hundred and fifty thousan' profit—besides the interest. It's jest like you stole 'em!"

"We-e-e-l," hesitated Black John, "at that prishe mebbe a man might take a chanct."

"Course you kin take a chanct—only it's a sure thing fer you. We're the ones that's takin' the chanct—we've got to git our money out of the cards. If it worn't that we figger we kin git it back, we wouldn't let them bonds go at no discount whatsoever. Here's the bonds—all of 'em."

"All right," agreed Black John. "It's a deal. There's yer money—count it, while I figger up these bonds. Then we'll all know we ain't be'n short-changed."

A quarter of an hour later, bonds and bills having been checked to the satisfaction of all concerned, the two men took their departure.

"Sho long!" called Black John from the doorway, as the two shoved off in the canoe. "You boys be careful you don' take no wooden nickels!"

Returning to the bar he stood contemplating the pile of bonds while Old Cush scowled in silent disapproval. "By God," he exclaimed suddenly, "I know'd there was somethin' wrong! Them birds fergot to put them slips back in the name-can! What was them names they draw'd out, Cush? I'll write out some new slips."

OLD CUSH snorted his disgust. "Somethin' wrong—a couple of strips of paper out of a can! Sometimes, John, you kin be the damndest fool I ever seen. Most gen'lly when you git soused you've got some sense left in yer head—damn little, sometimes, but some—but this time—fifty thousan' dollars in cold cash fer a lot of bonds that's so sizzlin' hot that they're sendin' out special patrols of the Mounted fer 'em! Ain't you got no sense, at all? Take it from me—yer goin' to come out of this drunk with a hell of a headache!"

White teeth showed through the black beard, and suddenly Old Cush was aware that the drunken stare had disappeared

from the blue eyes that twinkled into his own. "What do you mean—cold cash?" he asked. "By God, when them boys begin shovin' out that cash in Dawson, they're goin' to find out it's a damn sight hotter'n them bonds ever thought of bein'!"

"You mean to tell me you ain't drunk—an' ain't be'n all along?" demanded Cush.

"I don't rec'lect of tellin' you I ain't drunk," grinned the other. "Where'n hell did you git the idee that I was? Cripes—I ain't had more'n a dozen er fifteen drinks. What would I be drunk fer?"

"Well, you talked an' acted drunk as hell."

"Oh, shore—I done that fer to give them birds a chanct to unload them bonds onto me. It was jest a little play actin', Cush. You know I always wanted to be an actor. Sometimes we'll go to work and stage a real drayma."

"Like hell we will! We've had enough of yer damn draymas, as it is! If anything

had went wrong with them other ones you pulled off, I'd of been in a hell of a fix! What you goin' to do with them damn bonds, now you've got 'em?"

"Don't you rec'lect that I promised Corporal Downey, I'd git 'em fer him, if they show'd up on Halfaday?"

"Yeah—but it looks like you went in kind of deep, jest to do Downey a favor. When all's said an' done, John—fifty thousan' dollars is fifty thousan' dollars."

"Oh, hell," replied Black John, "what's little amounts like them, amongst friends?"

OLD CUSH eyed the other narrowly. "Where'd you git all that money, John? An' what d'you mean about it bein' hot?"

"It's what you might call the emolument of virtue—havin' to do with them three fellas that One Armed John told us was in Olson's shack, down the crick. I mistrusted they was malefactors of some kind, so I took that there prospectin' trip. In the course of my peregrinations——"

"What in hell's them? Can't you talk no English, at all?"

"As I was sayin'," continued Black John, ignoring the interruption, "whilst I was on that trip, I was instrumental in the prevention of a crime, as a reward fer which meritorious act I took over that money. An' it wasn't till Downey came up here the other day huntin' fer these bonds that I realized, from somethin' he told me, that them partic'lar bills was ondesirable property to have. An' them fellas will be findin' it out, too, jest about the time they begin shuckin' it out around Dawson. Guess I'll jest drop down an' watch the fun. Besides, I've got to fetch Corporal Downey them bonds. You know, Cush, up here we've got to work hand in glove with the police."

III

HELLO, John—back agin already?" Curley, the genial bartender of the Tivoli Saloon in Dawson, greeted the huge man who faced him across the bar, as he set out a bottle and two glasses. "You folks can't be very busy up on Halfaday, the way yer runnin' back an' forth."

"Oh, we're busy, all right," replied Black John as he filled his glass. "But, cripes, you can't expect a man to spend his whole life in toil. Time a man cranks a windlass, an' shovels gravel eighteen, twenty hours a day, over a period of years, he's entitled to a little vacation, now an' then."

"Yeah," grinned Curley, "but they tell me there's a hell of a lot of windlasses you never cranked—an' a hell of a lot of gravel you never shovelled."

"Shut up, an' have another," laughed Black John, laying a bill on the bar. Picking up the bill, Curley glanced at its number, and dropping it into the till, laid the change on the bar.

"What the hell's the matter?" queried Black John. "Think it's counterfeit, or somethin'?"

"No, it ain't that it might be queer. But ever sence Chase was kidnapped, an' the Consolidated paid out that fifty thousan' to git him back, we're s'posed to look at the numbers on all bills. We've got a list of 'em a yard long there in the till. When we take in a bill that might be one of 'em, we check it with the list. This here bill you give me was only five numbers long, so it couldn't of been on the list. It's a cinch that some time or other, somewheres, them bills is bound to show up—an' the police is hopin' it'll be here. The kidnappin' bein' in their territory, they'd like to grab off the ones that done it. You was the one that found Chase an' fetched him back—where do you think they're at?"

"Well," replied Black John, "that would be hard to say. Of course, they might have hit fer the outside. But then ag'in, they might jest be layin' low till the stink blow'd away. I don't claim to be no authority on them criminal matters, but off hand I'd say that them bills would begin showin' up most any time, now."

"How long you goin' to be here?"

"Oh, not more'n a night er so. I jest

run down fer a couple of sessions of stud."

Curley grinned. "Old Bettles says you're the world's worst stud player. He claims you stayed through four or five stiff raises with a pair of deuces, back to back, an' him with one deuce showin' all along—and then you ketched the case deuce fer yer last card, an' beat him out of a hell of a big pot."

"Yeah, that's the way of it," chuckled the big man. "Trouble with most folks, they ain't got no faith in deuces jest 'cause they're little. Guess I'll set down by the table, yonder, an' read the paper till the boys drifts in."

BLACK JOHN, taking the Ladue Creek shortcut, had timed his arrival in Dawson to correspond as closely as possible to that of Fulton and Whitney, who would reach the big camp by way of the White River and the Yukon.

Thus, it was that, some two hours after he seated himself, he watched with interest through a small hole punched in the newspaper that concealed his face, as the two men entered, strode to the bar, lowered their packs to the floor, and demanded refreshment. He saw Curley set out the bottle and glasses, and saw Fulton lay a bill on the bar, in payment. He saw Curley pick up the bill, glance at it, and turn toward the till. Then, as the men filled their glasses, he noted that the bartender laid the bill on the back bar, counted out some change, which he placed on the bar before Fulton, then, with a casual air, turned his back upon the two, removed a long slip of paper from the till, and once more consulted the number on the bill.

A grin twitched the corners of Black John's lips as he watched Curley beckon to Joe, the porter, whisper a few words into his ear, and then turn toward the two customers with a genial invitation to have one on the house—as Joe slipped unobtrusively out the back door.

It was evident, during the next half-hour, that the two strangers found themselves amid congenial surroundings. The house matched their purchases, drink for drink, and roars of laughter greeted the pithy but unprintable stories that bandied back and forth across the bar.

Then Black John drew the newspaper a bit closer for better concealment, as Corporal Downey stepped into the room and, crossing to the bar, paused behind the two. Receiving an almost imperceptible nod from Curley, the young officer laid a hand lightly upon the shoulder of each.

"I want to have a little talk with you men down to headquarters," he said.

The two turned swiftly. "What the hell!" exclaimed Whitney.

"There's some mistake here," blustered Fulton, truculently.

"Maybe," replied Downey. "I don't claim to be the man that never makes 'em. If there is, you fellows have got nothin' to fear. Until we find out, though, you're both under arrest for the kidnappin' of Frederick Chase, an' possession of the ransom money."

"Kidnappin'!" scoffed Fulton, with a laugh that Black John interpreted as one of vast relief. "Yer crazy as hell! Where was this kidnappin' pulled off—an' when?"

"Oh, a couple of months ago—right here in Dawson."

"That lets us out. We never seen Dawson till today!"

"Maybe," admitted Downey. "Come along with me, an' we'll find out."

"Sure we'll go," agreed Fulton with alacrity. "Why the hell wouldn't we? We ain't got nothin' to fear. Come on, cop—let's get it over with."

IV

AN HOUR later, Black John rose from the table, yawned, stretched prodigiously, and stepped to the bar. "I'm buyin' one," he announced, as Curley turned from the back bar to face him.

"Hell's fire, John—you been here all the time? I'd plumb fergot you. Where the hell was you at?"

"Oh, I set down over there to the table to read the paper, but I might have got kind of sleepy, an' took a little snooze."

"An' you didn't see what come off?"

"What come off? There couldn't be no hell of a lot come off, er I'd of woke up. I ain't no sound sleeper. It don't pay to be."

"There wasn't no excitement. It all comes off nice and quiet. Downey slipped in here an' pinched them kidnappers!"

"Well," grinned Black John, "you wouldn't expect him to let 'em run around loose, would you? That's what police is paid fer—to pinch miscreants like them."

"Yes, sir—two guys come in an' ordered the drinks, an' one of 'em lays a bill on the bar, an' I checks the number of it with that list, an' damn if it wasn't one of 'em! So I slips Joe the word to go fetch Downey, an' he come, an' pinched 'em both."

"Good work," approved Black John. "It looks like you both done yer duty."

"You bet! Damn cusses like them had ort to git pinched. Chances is, if the Consolidated hadn't paid that money, like they told 'em to, they'd of knocked Chase off. What'll they git fer it, John? What's the law on kidnappin'?"

"A term of years," answered the other. "I can't say off hand, jest how long. But it'll give 'em plenty of time to think things over."

"Damn if you wasn't right—about them bills bein' about due to show up. How the hell could you tell?"

"Oh, jest common sense—an' mebbe some slight insight into the workin's of the criminal mind. Cripes, anyone could of doped that out."

"Yeah?" retorted Curley, a vast respect showing in his eyes. "Well, no wonder there ain't no crime on Halfaday! Gosh, John—you'd ort to be in the police!"

"No, no! I wouldn't make a good policeman. Hell, a policeman's got to be smart." Passing around the end of the bar, Black John retrieved his light pack and slung a strap to his shoulder. "Guess I'll jest percolate around a while. If the boys drops in tell 'em I'll be back. Tell Bettles he better be practisin' up on his stud."

BLACK JOHN, as was his privilege, opened the door of Corporal Downey's office at detachment headquarters of the Mounted and stepped into the room, to find the young officer, his desk top covered with bills, and a long strip of typewritten numbers in his hand.

"Hello, Downey!" he greeted. "Cripes it must be pay day!"

"Yeah," grinned the officer, "an' I draw'd my salary fer the next twenty-five years in advance, eh? Do you know what this stuff is?"

"I might hazard a guess that it's money."

"It's money, all right! It's the money the Consolidated paid over to the kidnappers to get Chase back."

"Well, well! So you got it back, eh? Good work, Downey! Did you git the kidnappers along with it? I run acrost 'em, you remember, when they had Chase up on Halfaday. I wouldn't have no compunctions about helpin' identify sech damn scoundrels as them, because, by fetchin' Chase up there, they might have jeopardized the morals of our crick."

"I don't think you could identify these two that had the money," replied Downey. "I had Chase in here a few minutes ago, and he said he'd never seen these men. He definitely stated that they were not the ones who held him prisoner. Kidnap gangs work like that. The ones that do the snatchin' an' holdin' ain't the ones that handles the money. They work it that way so that in case they're picked up passin' the stuff, the victim can't identify 'em."

"Ain't they smart?" grinned Black John. "Why, if they'd put all them brains into honest pursuits, they'd prob'ly do well."

"They're smart, all right," replied Downey, "but they ain't quite smart enough. They overlooked the fact that possession of this money is a criminal offense of itself, and to any reasonable jury the fact that they had it would link them up with the kidnappin'. Here's how I've doped it out.

You remember, you told me that you followed the man who had this money up the Yukon, but failed to overtake him?"

"Shore, I remember that."

"Well, he went on up past the mouth of the White, where these two were prob'ly waitin' for him. Then they took over the money. An' the chances are they knocked off this bird an' the other one—the two that done the snatchin'—because these two I've got had every damn cent of the fifty thousan'."

"Tch, tch, tch! Don't it beat hell how some folks carries on? It's a wonder to me that them damn crooks trusts one another out of their sight!"

"I'm mighty glad I picked these birds up, John—as much for your sake, as for the Consolidated's."

"My sake? Cripes, Downey—I'd of got along, if you'd never ketched 'em."

YEAH," grinned Downey, "but if I hadn't picked up these fellows with that money, I'd have always held a sneakin' suspicion that you had it. You see, I was never quite satisfied that you didn't lie to me when you said you never overtook that bird goin' upriver. I figured you had overtook him, an' made him fork over the bills. Of course, I never could have proved it—but jest the same I'd have always thought it. I'm damn glad that this clears you of even that suspicion."

"Well, so'm I, Downey—if that's the way you felt about it. Cripes, I never had no idee you'd think I'd lie to you! How about givin' me the chanct to look these birds over, anyway? You see, they might of been hidin' out on Halfaday, too—an' I never connected 'em with the crime. Strangers comes and goes, an' a man wouldn't know who was mixed up in it, if they kep' away from them others."

"That's so," agreed Downey. "Wait till I call Constable Peters to watch this stuff, an' we'll step into the cell room."

"I s'pose they denied they know'd anythin' about the kidnappin', eh?"

"Sure they did. However, when I questioned them about the possession of the money, they were mighty vague, an' wound up by claimin' they found it in a cache."

WHEN Peters appeared, Black John followed Corporal Downey into the cell room, where the two prisoners sat in adjoining iron barred cages. Both stood up and paled perceptibly at the sight of Black John.

"There they are," said Downey. "Have you ever seen 'em before?"

According the men scarcely a glance, Black John swung his light pack to the floor in the little passageway before the cells, and turned suddenly upon the officer. "By gosh, Downey!" he cried suddenly, "here I be, foolin' around like this, an' plumb fergot what I come clean down from Halfaday to fetch you." Fumbling in his pack, he drew forth a sizable packet, which he extended toward the officer. "Here's them bonds you was inquirin' about up to Cush's that day. Half a million dollars' worth of 'em; they're all there—count 'em."

"You mean," cried Downey, eagerly seizing the packet, and cutting the cord that bound it, "you located those bonds? The ones that were stolen in that express robbery?"

"I wouldn't be surprised an' them's the ones," replied Black John. "They're bonds—an' the amount of 'em checks with what you claimed was stole. An' by the way, Downey, didn't you claim there was a murder connected with that robbery?"

"Sure there was. A damn dirty murder, too. They never gave the poor devil of a messenger a chance. They'll sure swing for that job, when we lay hands on 'em!"

There was a movement in one of the cells, and Downey looked up from his scrutiny of the bonds to encounter the pale face of Fulton.

"Hey, Corp'rl," said the man huskily, "we want to come clean on that kidnappin' job. We was in on it, all right. We lied

to you, but we been talkin' it over—an' we decided to plead guilty."

"All right," said the officer, "I'll take yer statements, later."

HE TURNED to give Black John a rousing thump on the back with the flat of his hand. "By gosh, John—you don't know how glad I am to get hold of these securities! But how about the men that had 'em. Did you bring them down?"

"Nope," replied Black John, "I didn't. You know damn well, Downey, that I never had nothin' to do with arrestin' anyone—er even squealin' on 'em. It ain't ethical, an' I wouldn't have nothin' to do with it. If you think them men's on Halfaday, an' you kin locate 'em—go to it. You won't be neither helped nor hindered when you git there. I promised you I'd try an' locate them bonds if they showed up on the crick—an' I done so."

"You sure did, John—an' I thank you for it. But my thanks don't stack up very big beside what you've got comin'. It jest goes to show that it pays to be honest. Sir Henry Billson has posted a reward of a hundred thousan' dollars in cash fer the return of those bonds before October first—the date when the merger deal expires. An' it all goes to you."

"Well, well," grinned Black John. "That change'll shore come handy."

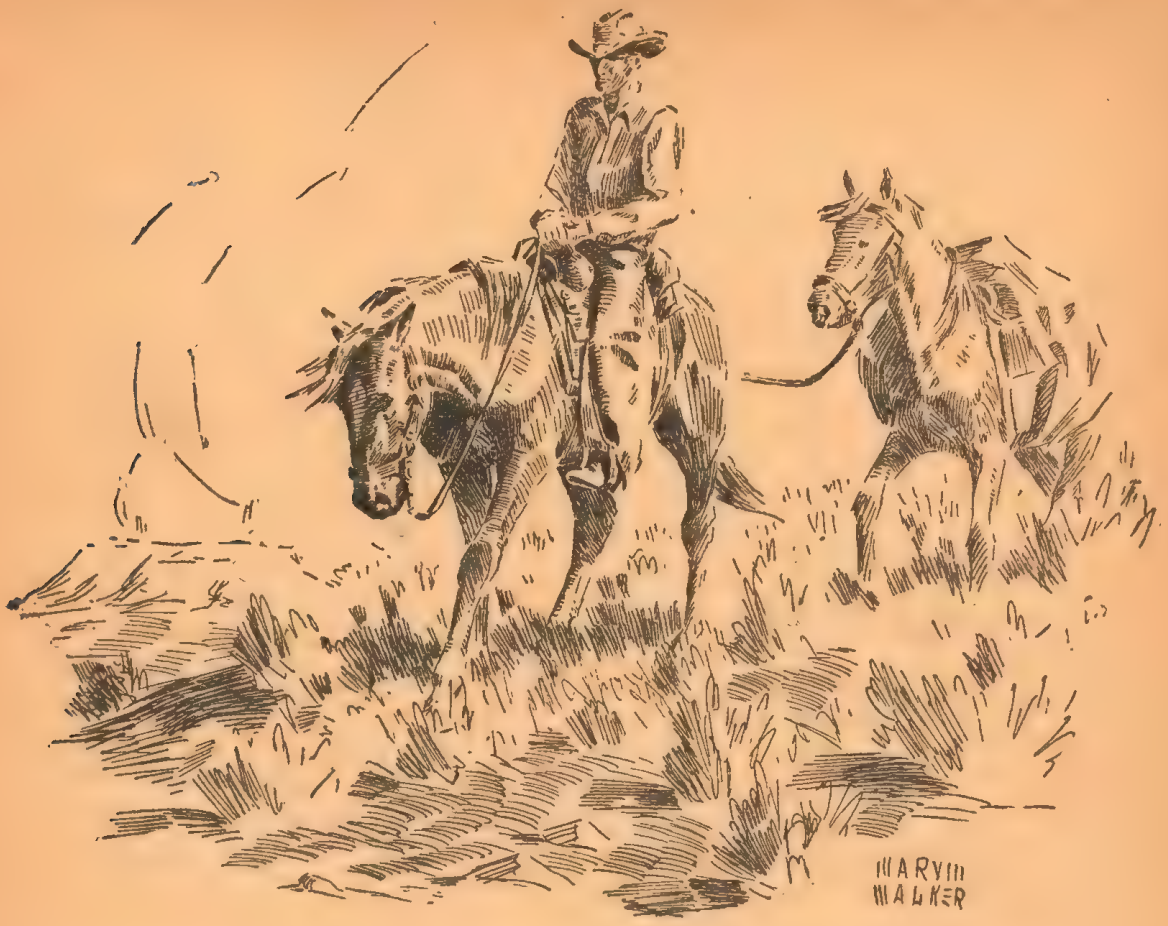
"Oh—yes—how about these two fellows—did you ever see 'em before?"

Black John eyed the two white-faced men deliberately, and subjected them to long and careful scrutiny. "No," he said, shaking his head in a slow negative. "No—I can't say that I ever laid eyes on either one of 'em—an' I've got a good mem'ry fer faces, too."

"Come on, then," said Downey, turning to lead the way back to the office. "I want to wire Vancouver about these bonds."

As he was about to follow the officer, Black John turned a solemn face toward the two men in the cells. "There's an old sayin', my men," he boomed sententiously, "that honesty is the best policy. If you two had learnt to live moral, you wouldn't be where yer at now. Jest remember that—when they turn you loose twenty, thirty years hence. It'll do you good."

The Tonto Kid Turns Peace Officer—But Not for Long



HEADING SOUTH

By HENRY HERBERT KNIBBS

Author of
"A Slim Chance," "Wildcat Reward," "Slim Plays a Fast Game," etc.

THE bank window was riddled with bullets. Bits of bark were chipped from the plaza trees. A bay saddle horse staggered across the plaza, sank down and lay with head outstretched. Citizens of the state capital crept warily from behind counter and door, emerged from recessed hallways. The smell of burnt powder hung in the air. Someone telephoned the governor's mansion that the Randall gang had again raided the town. So far as the governor himself was concerned, the news was a bit late. The Randalls had fired into the governor's mansion as they raced past, after their unsuccessful attempt to loot the First National Bank. Emerson, the druggist, a puncher from the Pecos, and the cashier of the First National Bank lay dead in the plaza. One of the Randall gang was badly wounded but still in the saddle.

The volley fired into the governor's mansion was an echo of the gang's frequently repeated challenge to the chief executive; if he wanted them, he could come and get them. Several times in the past five years the invitation had been accepted. But as yet no posse or peace officer had been able to dislodge the outlaws from their stronghold in Horse Thief

Canyon. The canyon itself was all but inaccessible, and the mountain trails west led into the Bad Lands, affording an easy retreat in case of a prolonged attack. The Hamills of Thunder Mountain controlled the timberland and high meadows south of the canyon. The Hamills themselves were notoriously unfriendly toward peace officers.

The day following the raid, a slim, rather carefully dressed man of about thirty called on the governor. The caller's name, the governor learned, was Alexander Akers. Always out for votes, the governor smiled. "Sandy Acres, eh?"

"So I have been told. But not gritty enough to go after the Randall outfit."

The governor's heavy gray eyebrows went up. Mr. Akers hadn't been in the reception room five minutes, and he had put his finger on a sore spot. This was just a little bit too swift. As governor of the state, The Honorable Frank B. Rowland felt entitled to a little more respect. "To just what am I indebted——" he began stiffly.

"For the pleasure of this visit?" Mr. Akers proffered a cigar which, not being accepted, he lighted himself. "Or for my remark about the Randalls?"

"Let us say both."

Mr. Akers nodded. "That saves time. However, allow me to point out that I didn't make the mistake of calling you Frank."

It pleased the governor to be facetious.

"Frank with a capital, or lower case?"

"Let us say both."

THE governor was no fool—he couldn't afford to be. So he let down the bars. "Haven't I met you before?"

"Several times, when you were a private citizen. But I don't care to trespass on that circumstance. About a year before you received the nomination, if you haven't forgotten, the pleasure of your company netted my establishment something like five hundred dollars."

A good politician, the governor could remember that poker game and laugh. "Correct! You are Slim Akers."

"Gambler. Now we're on common ground."

"How are things going, Akers?"

"Quietly, in my line."

"Could I persuade you to take a little drink?"

"Why, yes—if you won't smoke."

"Not—well—let's try one of those cigars."

Again Mr. Akers gracefully proffered a cigar which the governor accepted as an accompaniment to the little drink.

"Wonderful," said Mr. Akers, setting down his glass, "how a little conversation loosens up the rivets."

"Especially the unofficial rivets. What can I do for you?"

"Issue a pardon for Young Pete, better known as The Tonto Kid."

Governor Rowland was surprised, more than surprised, and he showed it. Mr. Akers' nerve hadn't failed any since their last meeting. "But Akers!"

"Your constituents, and so forth. Of course! I expected that. Barring a select few, your constituents know as little about the real history of The Tonto Kid as you do. He's a bad man, a gunman, a killer. That's wholesale opinion, never sifted. What started him riding the high trails? When did he ever bump off a man without giving that man every chance in the world to either back down or pull his gun? How many times has he let a peace officer go when he could have blown his head off? When did The Kid ever go back on a friend," Mr. Akers looked the governor hard in the eye, "or play a favorite? I've traveled with The Tonto Kid for a good many years. I know him both ways from the jack. There isn't a straighter man in the state, nor a man with more sand. But your newspapers and your loose mouthed gentlemen who read them, all have it that The Kid is a rattler that will strike anything that comes within reach. To the contrary, if the peace officers of this unenlightened community had spent as much

time leaving him alone as he has trying to keep out of trouble, he'd hung up his gun and give the law a chance to get a little much needed sleep. Pardon him, and see if I am not correct."

THE governor felt there was considerable justice in the suggestion. The Tonto Kid, in spite of his record, was more a victim of circumstance than a deliberate lawbreaker. But to pardon him offhand would raise a storm of protest. Political rivals would charge him with currying favor with the wild bunch. It wouldn't do. For a full minute Governor Rowland studied the blotter on his desk. "I'm sorry, Akers," he said finally. "But it is impossible."

"Pardon a contradiction. You're not sorry—yet. But you feel you might be, next election time. I had anticipated your reply. This is my proposition. Give The Kid a pardon, deputize him and turn him loose, and he'll clean up the Randall outfit or get shot to pieces trying. Either way, you win."

"Have you talked with him?"

"Plenty. Now, I'm talking for him."

"Why didn't he come and see me himself?"

Mr. Akers allowed himself a smile. "Getting right down to cases, he doesn't trust you."

"And you do?"

"I'm not The Tonto Kid."

Governor Rowland frowned. "Folks seem to hold me personally responsible for the existence of the Randall gang."

"Aren't you?"

The back of Governor Rowland's neck tingled. This man Akers was too damned insistent. Like a bulldog on the end of a sack, he wouldn't let go. Swing the sack and he would hang on all the harder. Personally responsible for the existence of the Randall gang! The governor snorted, inwardly. Outwardly he remained the smiling politician. "Responsible? Hardly, Akers. Trouble is, when we do go after the Randalls we don't get any coöperation from the community."

IT WAS Mr. Akers' turn to show surprise. "Then Emerson the druggist, cashier Harrison, and that young puncher from the Pecos stood off eight of the Randall gang yesterday just for the pleasure of getting shot at, and killed?"

"A splendid example of individual courage."

"Yes, I know. But they wouldn't have put it that way. They figured, as citizens,

it was their job. That's what I call coöperation."

"Accidental coöperation, if you wish."

"Got results, didn't it?"

"That isn't the point."

Mr. Akers was sorely tempted to say several things. Had he been suing for a pardon for himself he would have said them. But he represented his friend The Tonto Kid, so he restrained himself. "You speak of coöperation. That's exactly what I'm offering. Sheriff Yardlaw has failed to land the gang, and Buck is the best man in the state, barring one. Deputize The Tonto Kid and he'll make good."

"I can hardly deputize an outlaw."

"That's a joke. I could name seven or eight outlaws drawing salaries from the state. I would even be willing to name 'em in print." Mr. Akers rose.

Governor Rowland gestured to him to sit down. "No hurry, Akers. Let's look at

this from another angle. Suppose I issue the pardon. What guarantee have I that The Kid will clean up the gang?"

"None, whatever. He'll try."

"All right. Tell him to go ahead." Governor Rowland waved a magnanimous hand. "If he turns the trick I'll issue the pardon."

Mr. Akers deliberated. "No. The Kid won't go after them without written authority from you. The pardon can come later."

Governor Rowland reached for a pad, wrote a brief line and handed it to his visitor. "Tell him to take this to room 28, Capitol Building. Glad you came in, Akers. Give my regards to The Kid."

ARRIVING in the state capital following the attempted bank robbery, Sheriff Yardlaw was summoned to a private conference with the governor. Yardlaw was instructed to ignore the Randall gang and the recent raid, also to keep his hands off The Tonto Kid should the latter show up. The tall, grizzled sheriff was not overpleased with these instructions. The governor had tied his hands. Sheriff Yardlaw decided to do a little intelligent listening.

A day later, while loafing in the Capitol Hotel bar the sheriff heard a voice he knew. Turning he saw The Tonto Kid's friend, Mr. Slim Akers, conversing with the proprietor of the local gambling hall. Mr. Akers had no establishment in town. His presence in the Capitol was interesting. Yardlaw concealed his curiosity with a brief nod to the gambler, who finally left his companion and joined the sheriff.

"This," said Akers, "is no place to talk politics."

"Who wants to talk politics?" growled Yardlaw.

"I do."

If anyone knew why the governor was protecting The Tonto Kid it would be Mr. Akers. Recalling the governor's injunction to keep his hands off The Tonto Kid, the sheriff accepted Mr. Akers' invitation to more private quarters—an upstairs hotel room overlooking the plaza. Not that the gambler ever did any loose talking. But he had expressed a desire to talk.

"Have a cigar," said Mr. Akers.

"Just had one."

"Have a drink?"

"Just had one."

"Well, have a chair."

It was warm, and they sat by the open window. "Suppose," said the gambler, "we get down to cases."

"Suits me."

"You're taking a little vacation. Don't be surprised that I know it. I'm largely responsible."

Yardlaw said nothing.

"Just between ourselves, Buck, the governor has deputized The Tonto Kid to go out and clean up the Randall outfit."

Yardlaw nodded.

"If The Kid busts the gang, he gets his pardon."

"I'll be damned glad if he does."

"Save us all a lot of wear and tear, won't it? You know as well as I do, that Young Pete is entitled to a break. I had an idea the governor would talk to you about it. But you can't always tell about governors."

"Or about The Kid." Yardlaw nodded toward the plaza.

"Yes. I've been watching him." Mr. Akers leaned out. "Hey, Pete, come on up and meet a friend."

THE gaunt, grizzled sheriff rose, took off his belt and gun and laid them on the dresser. This was a great concession for the fighting sheriff to make to his old enemy The Tonto Kid. And yet it was natural enough. Between them existed no personal enmity. For several years Yardlaw had trailed The Kid. Several times they had met in battle. Outlaw and peace officer they had come to respect each other's nerve and ability. Now a pencilled line from the governor and a little piece of plated metal had put them on an equal footing socially. In disarming himself the sheriff had been wise. The Tonto Kid

would never take advantage of an unarmed man.

Someone knocked on the hotel room door, and although it was unlocked, waited for it to be opened. Mr. Akers did the honors. "This young fellow," he said as Young Pete stepped in, "is The Tonto Kid."

Young Pete grinned. "Hello, Buck. How's it goin'?"

Noting the belt and gun on the dresser, The Kid followed Yardlaw's example. Mr. Akers insisted that they shake hands. Yardlaw smiled. "Understand you're going after the Randall gang."

"So Slim tell me."

"Going in alone?"

"Sure! I don't want any posse messin' up my party."

Dark eyed, slender, boyish except when his eyes hardened, Young Pete stood looking at the sheriff. Gaunt, battle scarred, Yardlaw gazed at the youth who so often had given him the slip. Mr. Akers relieved what seemed a slight tension. "First time you fellows have ever shaken hands, I take it?"

Young Pete laughed. "Hell, I been willin' to shake hands with Buck any time he let go his gun."

Yardlaw indicated the badge on Young Pete's vest. "How does it feel to be wearing one of those things?"

"Kinda like hidin' behind a tree when you're shootin'. I don't figure to be wearin' it long."

"Don't know that you will, if you stack up against the Randall outfit single handed."

"The fella that gets it can keep it."

Sheriff Yardlaw nodded grimly. "Bart Randall might like to try for it. He's in town."

RANDALL was in town! This was news. Yet Young Pete said nothing. Slim Akers merely elevated his eyebrows. Randall's brother was in town, probably scouting for the gang. Both Slim and Young Pete knew that Yardlaw would have gone after him except for the governor's orders. "I'd kind of like to meet him," said Pete finally. "What does he look like?"

Yardlaw told him. For a moment Young Pete stood gazing down onto the plaza. Presently he rose and moved toward the door. "Guess you fellas'll have to excuse me for a couple of minutes."

"Don't make it any longer," said Slim Akers.

The door closed. Mr. Akers glanced at Yardlaw. The sheriff rose.

"I feel like taking a little walk," declared the gambler.

Buck Yardlaw picked up his belt and gun and followed Mr. Akers down to the street. "It's his party," said Mr. Akers as they moved toward the Capitol Saloon. "Unless another one of the gang should happen to be in town. I don't want to see anyone get shot in the back."

Opposite the front of the saloon stood a telephone pole. Against the pole leaned Young Pete, his thumbs in the arm holes of his vest. His hat was pushed back. A thin smile played about his mouth. Directly across the street in the doorway of the saddle shop stood Mr. Akers and Sheriff Yardlaw. Mr. Akers was smoking a cigar. Yardlaw was gazing at a cowpony tied to a hitch rail half a block away, a bay and white paint horse. Altogether too showy, reflected Yardlaw. Too easily spotted. The horse belonged to Bart Randall, brother of the outlaw. Mr. Akers' gaze was fixed on the doorway of the Capitol.

WITH no definite plan in mind, Young Pete had begun his campaign by simply awaiting developments. Sooner or later Randall's brother would show up. If the outlaw wanted a fight he could have it. If he chose to ignore the deputy loafing outside the saloon, Pete would not challenge him. But he would mark him down, note how he dressed and acted. A mining man and a local attorney came out of the saloon, glanced at the young fellow leaning against the telephone pole and

moved on. In the doorway of the saddle shop Yardlaw and Slim Akers stood talking quietly. The paint horse stamped and switched flies. A number of townsfolk were passing back and forth. Pete noted that there was not a town constable in sight.

Black hair, blue eyes, medium build, about twenty-five years old, acts tough. Yardlaw's description of Bart Randall. Aware that the gang had friends in town, Young Pete kept the telephone pole at his back.

Glancing across the street he noted that Slim Akers and the sheriff were leaving the doorway of the saddle shop—as plain a hint as he could wish. The saddle shop was directly in line of fire should the man who had just come out of the Capitol Saloon happen to be Randall. Pete seemed to be talking to himself. "Black hair, blue eyes . . ." The roughly clad man coming toward him stopped and stared at the badge on Pete's vest. "Acts tough," murmured Pete, flicking his half smoked cigarette into the gutter. Casually The Tonto Kid glanced at the other man, whose face was lined with a sneer of disdain for the young, slender, smooth faced youth sporting a deputy's badge. Still leaning easily against the telephone pole, Pete seemed to be staring at the other's boots, powdered with the red clay dust of the hill country. Yardlaw had disappeared. Slim Akers was standing a few doors up the street from the saddle shop.

"Anything about those boots you don't like?"

Young Pete looked up questioningly. "Talkin' to me?"

"Talking to you."

"All right. Go ahead." Pete saw Randall glance toward the paint horse.

"You're feeling real healthy, ain't you?"

Pete nodded. "Real healthy."

Randall strode up and flicked his finger at the deputy's badge as though snapping a fly from Young Pete's vest.

"Anything about that badge you don't like?" Pete moved an inch or two, freeing his shoulder from the telephone pole.

RANDALL seemed to hesitate. Finally he swung round, and turning his back on The Tonto Kid, started to walk toward the paint horse at the hitch rail. Slim Akers, across the street, thought that the outlaw had backed down. But Young Pete had a different idea. Hardly had the outlaw taken two steps when he whirled. The guns of the outlaw and The Tonto Kid crashed like a single shot. Slim Akers groaned. His sympathy was wasted. Randall swayed and fell, face down on the sidewalk. Gun poised, Young Pete walked slowly toward him.

In the few seconds between the time Randall had accosted The Tonto Kid, and

the shooting, but one or two had seen the fight, or knew exactly what had happened. In the crowd gathering round the dead outlaw, loomed the grizzled face of Sheriff Yardlaw. "Yes, it's Bart Randall," he said. But when questioned as to who shot the outlaw, Yardlaw had no answer. Rumor spread that Buck Yardlaw had killed Bart Randall. When the news reached the governor, he sent for Yardlaw and got the facts. Apparently uninterested in the shooting, Mr. Slim Akers stood a few feet up the street using his pen knife to dig a bullet from a telephone pole.

In Mr. Akers' room in the Capitol Hotel sat Young Pete gazing down onto the plaza. No matter what happened now, he would have to go through with the job. The elder Randall wouldn't leave a leg under

a horse till he rode down the man who had killed his brother.

Cool and smiling, Mr. Slim Akers entered the room. Walking over to The Tonto Kid he laid a lead slug on the window sill. "Compliments of Bart Randall. I figured he had got you."

"No. Because he didn't know what I would do. The minute he started to walk away, I knew what he would do. Some fellas make mistakes like that."

"Going to stay around town and take them on as they come?"

Pete shook his head. "I'm going over into their country. I know the trails pretty well. I'll need a pack horse and some grub. Mebby you or Buck can stake me."

"Buck will let you have 'most anything he's got. Know where he was when the ruckus started?"

"No."

"He was sitting in the upstairs window of Rodney's, next to the saddle shop. No one would have got you from behind."

"And I suppose you were wearin' a telegraph pole for a chest protector."

"That's exactly what I was doing. How would you like a little drink?"

"When I can't handle myself without liquor, I'll hang up my gun."

Slim Akers glanced at his friend. Young Pete was staring out of the window, apparently lost in thought.

THE next day a rumor spread that The Tonto Kid was in town. An eye witness of the shooting was responsible for the news. Governor Rowland, who didn't want The Tonto Kid's presence advertised, was anything but pleased. But Yardlaw pointed out that it was the best thing that could have happened. The news would reach Randall, who, while he would hardly risk another raid immediately, probably would quietly send in someone to get The Tonto Kid, and thus split up the gang. "Let folks talk all they want to," advised Yardlaw. "Let them say The Tonto Kid is hiding somewhere in town until he can make a safe get away. Just as long as no one actually knows where he is, just so much easier it will be for him to follow out his plans."

"What are his plans?" asked the governor bluntly.

"I don't know what his plans are. I don't even know whether he's in town or not."

The governor who wished to give some carefully edited news to the papers, surmised that Yardlaw knew considerably more than he cared to tell. "Governor is out to clean up the Randall gang." That would make a valuable headline. But the headline didn't appear. Even Young Pete's closest friend, Mr. Akers, seemed to know nothing about his whereabouts.

Meanwhile Young Pete, riding his own horse and leading a pack animal loaned him by Yardlaw, was riding south. Not until he was some miles out from the capital, did he swing west and make for the hills. Neither Yardlaw nor Akers knew just when he left or which way he would ride.

At dawn he made camp in the timbered range of Thunder Mountain. His next ride would bring him well over the range and into San Dimas valley. Heading up San Dimas, another eight hours' ride would locate him in the rough, rock-strewn foothills back of Horsethief Canyon. Surmising that the Randall gang had scattered following the recent raid, Young Pete planned to hunt them out one at a time—a fool's job, with the chances a hundred to one that he would not come out of the venture alive. But that bothered him considerably less than the fact that he, who had been hunted from Mexico to the Canadian border, was now the hunter. Reason told him that he was right—that he had the law behind him, that every member of the gang was a killer who would shoot him or any other peace officer on sight. Yet he hated the job, and had he not given his word that he would see it through, he would have quit long before he reached the backyard of the Randall stronghold.

BOTH his horses staked well down the mountainside, Young Pete climbed to the crest overlooking Horsethief Canyon. The air was clear and warm, the grass on the range stirrup-high. Below, the great rock walled cleft of Horsethief Canyon spread from a knife-edge to a wide boulder-strewn wash where it met the distant desert. The ledge trail leading up to the stone house where, several years ago he had fetched the mortally wounded Pecos, showed sharp edged in the morning sun. In the corral back of the house stood two horses. Young Pete reasoned that at least two of the outlaws were at the gang's headquarters, possibly the man wounded in the recent raid and a companion. Pete did some reckoning. Bart Randall was out of it. That left seven to be accounted for. If two were holding out in the canyon, there must be five of the outlaws scattered back in the hill country. Two of the gang he knew my sight, Ed Randall and his right hand man, Harper. The other five he knew by name only; Lindquist, a Pecos cowboy and cattle rustler, Stevens, said to hail from the Tonto Valley, Bill Page, a former deputy sheriff, White Eye Johnson, a Texan, and Sarg, once a railroad man, who had joined the wild bunch. From Yardlaw's description Young Pete thought he could recognize them. As there was always the possibility that one or two of the gang might visit the canyon for word with their chief, or for supplies, Pete sat watching the stone house. After a half hour or so, he closed his eyes to clear his vision. When he opened them, a man was coming out of the stone house carrying another man. The figures were too far for Pete to catch any detail, but by the way the man being carried hung in the other's arms Pete judged him to be either unconscious or dead. In either case, why carry him out of the house? The man carrying the other walked to the rim of the ledge, paused for a second and then heaved his inanimate burden into the canyon below.

"That's one way of buryin' 'em," muttered Young Pete. Evidently the man wounded in the raid had died.

HARDENED by a life of outlawry, Young Pete tried to ignore the brutality of dumping a body into a canyon like a log. While aware that on the ledges or anywhere along those rocky walls there was no place to make a grave, and to pack the body up to the timber and bury it would have been a risky job because the Randalls were on the watch, still no logic could convince him that the act was either necessary, or decent.

Seldom curious as to motives except as they might affect his own welfare, Young Pete was irritated by a growing urge to meet the man who had so callously disposed of his companion. Pete wanted to size him up, note what kind of an eye he had and how he carried himself under ordinary circumstances. He was almost tempted to make his way into the canyon and wait on one of the ledges above the stone house until the outlaw appeared. While he might get away with it, it would be a foolish and unnecessary risk. At any moment one or more of the gang hiding back in the hills might take a notion to visit the stone house. Moreover, it was not a good idea to leave his horses too long. Someone might happen to discover them and surmising that their owner was not in that part of the country strictly for the fun of it, ambush and kill him. He could, he told himself, lie out on one of the canyon ledges and pick off anyone that came along. Although he knew that any of the Randall gang would skyline him and drop him merely on suspicion, it was not in his book to shoot a man down without giving him a chance.

The man in the stone house below came out with a saddle on his shoulder. Pete watched the other saddle up and lead his horse out of the corral. Would he ride up or down the canyon? The noon sun was hammering hard on ledge and tree and boulder. A haze of heat hung in the air. Far

below the man mounted and began to ride up the canyon trail. Pete drew back from the point of rocks where he had been sitting. A few yards north of him the trail crossed the timbered crest.

SOMEWHERE in the brush a rattler buzzed. Through the still air came the distant click of hoofs. A little later Pete could hear the creak of a saddle. Soon he would be able to see the man who had more than roused his curiosity. Screened by a clump of brush, Pete stared at the trail. The head of a steel gray horse showed, then its shoulders and front. The polished butt of a carbine glittered in the hot light. Sharp, hard blue eyes looked out from beneath the curled brim of a tattered sombrero. Sallow faced, his mouth and chin half concealed by a stubbly black beard, the rider of the steel gray rested his mount for a few seconds. Already Young Pete had identified him as Harper, Ed Randall's right hand man. Black Joe Harper he was called. Appreciating the value of surprising a man from the rear, rather than from in front, Young Pete made no move until the outlaw had ridden past. "Harper!" he called sharply, expecting the outlaw to whirl and fire. To his surprise Harper coolly pulled up his horse and turning faced the man who had called to him. His hard blue eyes swept Young Pete from head to foot. "Hello, Tonto! What in hell are you doing up here?"

"Lookin' for a couple of stray horses. Seen any?"

"No."

Pete stood with his hands touching the edges of his open vest. Slouched in the saddle, Harper looked as if he had no suspicion whatever of The Tonto Kid's mission. Yet he knew there was something wrong. After killing Bart Randall, Young Pete would hardly hide out in the Horsethief Canyon country. "Looking for Ed Randall?" asked the outlaw.

"Yes."

Harper bared his teeth in a grin. "He's looking for you. Seems you and Bart had a little argument."

"Seems we did."

LITTLE by little Pete drew back the edge of his vest. Catching the glint of the deputy's star, the outlaw's expression changed. "So that's it?" With the first word Harper went for his gun. At the second word he fired. The third was not much more than a mumble. Whirling his horse he spurred over the crest. Save that he knew he was hit, and hit hard, Harper was hardly aware that The Tonto Kid had fired at all.

Crashing down the hillside, wide of the trail, the outlaw's horse lunged and leaped, his rider rocking in the saddle. Young Pete didn't want to drop the horse. But it wouldn't do for Harper to get to his fellows and warn them. Half way down

the mountainside as the horse swerved to avoid a boulder, the outlaw fell, and lay crumpled up in the low brush.

For several minutes Young Pete stood watching the country below before he finally climbed down to where the dead outlaw lay. The shot had taken Harper in the pit of the stomach, paralyzed him. Had he been hit anywhere else except in the head or the heart, he would have kept on firing until either he or The Tonto Kid was down.

Gouging a hollow in the hillside Young Pete covered the outlaw's body with rocks. Far down the foothills Harper's horse was making for the spot where Pete's horses

were staked. Fearing the gray would stampede them Pete lost no time in getting down to the valley. The steel gray broke for the brush-lined slope on the western hillside. Before Pete could saddle up and take after him, the horse had disappeared. Sooner or later some of the gang would run onto the gray, and look for Harper. "Had a hunch I ought to have dropped that horse," muttered Pete as he prepared to move camp.

THE Hamills of Thunder Mountain claimed the land bordering the south side of Horsethief Canyon. A stranger trespassing on the property had to explain himself. While the Hamills would not bother a man hiding from the law, a peace officer was about as welcome in their territory as a cloudburst. Once before Young Pete had had occasion to ride the Hamill range and had barely escaped with his life. Yet the south rim afforded the only lookout now that Harper had been killed.

That evening Young Pete camped in the timber back from the south rim, his horses grazing in a grassy meadow a few yards beyond. In spite of the chance that the Hamills might discover him, the location had its advantages. From the canyon trail, far to the north, it would be difficult for anyone to identify him without a field glass, should any of the Randall gang happen to see him on the rim rock. In any event he was reasonably safe from an attack from the rear. Only because the gang respected the Hamill range were they tolerated in the neighborhood.

That evening Young Pete sat near the edge of the rim watching the stone house. The horse left in the corral below moved about nervously, apparently suffering for water. As darkness settled, Young Pete turned in. He had been asleep several hours when he was awakened by moonlight on his face. Through the still, starlit air came the occasional click of a shod hoof. Walking to the canyon rim, Young Pete peered down into the wide, dusky hollow. Directly across the canyon, and some two hundred feet below a patch of moonlight lay like a silver pool on the trail. Above and below the moonlit spot the canyon was deep in shadow. Faint and muffled, came the sound of horses moving along the trail. His gaze fixed on the pool of moonlight, Young Pete waited and listened. A horse stumbled. The sound of a curse came clearly through the still air. Finally the head of a horse poked into the pool of moonlight, its rider's figure tiny but distinct. Pete counted three horsemen. Some distance behind the others came a fourth, leading a horse with an empty saddle. A few minutes later a light showed dimly in the doorway of the stone house. The door closed. Four of the gang had assembled at headquarters. Pete wondered if Ed Randall was one of them, or if he had ridden to town in search of the man who shot his brother. The outlaws had found and captured Harper's mount. Pete went back to his blankets. For a long time he lay awake trying to shape some kind of plan. He decided, finally, that all planning was out of his hands. He would simply have to stay in the Horsethief Canyon country and take it as it came.

NEXT day, squatted near a tiny breakfast fire, Pete's gaze roved up and down the rimrock which ran like a clean-swept road in front of him. Just within the edge of the timber lay his blankets and saddle. A few yards farther back his horses grazed the circle of their stake ropes. The morning sun struck like slanting flame on the red bark of the big trees. In overalls, shirt and vest, his hat off, Young Pete might have been some stray cowboy who had bushed out for the night. Apparently unconcerned as to his surroundings, nevertheless his eye was constantly alert. Although his movements as he made breakfast seemed natural to the task, they were as deliberate as if planned. Now he was facing the rim rock and the wide void of the canyon. Again as he shoved a bit of dry branch into the fire, he was facing the timberlands. His hat was off not by

choice, but because its brim cut down his vision as he stooped above the fire. He hummed a tune, "Cowboy, What You Doin' Here?" That he had met and exterminated two of the Randall gang in the past few days did not bother him in the least. Had the shooting resulted from a private quarrel he would not have felt other than he did. The fact that he was a peace officer was secondary. In each instance his opponent had opened the fight. It was just as much his job to take care of himself as it was to take care of his enemies.

Glancing over the rim of his tin cup of coffee he saw a horseman coming through the timber. Pete ceased humming "Cowboy, What You Doin' Here?" Now he might have to answer the question. Black-bearded Judson Hamill, a Winchester across the saddle, was riding down the meadow where Pete's horses grazed. Young Pete's hand moved up under his vest. Unpinning the deputy's star he shoved it into his pocket.

Judson Hamill had once witnessed a strange quarrel in which his brother had been shot and killed by The Tonto Kid. At the time, Judson Hamill's brother was a peace officer, and consequently, according to the Hamill creed, beyond their protection. While no hand had been lifted against him as he rode from the scene of the shooting, Young Pete knew that hereafter the less he saw of the Hamills the better. Now he was camped on their range, grazing his horses in their meadows.

SQUATTING by the fire, his coffee cup in his hand, Pete nodded as Hamill rode up. The tall, gaunt mountain man showed no surprise in finding The Tonto Kid camped on his land. Yet his deep set black eyes asked a question. Again Young Pete nodded. "Campin' for a couple of days to catch my breath."

"Lost much breath lately?"

"Some." He gestured toward the canyon. "Them fellas over there got it."

"I heard about that." Judson Hamill waved his hand toward Young Pete's horses. "Seems you had time to catch up a pack horse before you left."

"Sure! I don't mind runnin' from a bunch, when it's necessary. But damned if I feel like starvin' to death."

"I heard it was a deputy sheriff got Bart Randall."

"So did I. But I don't believe everything telephoned on the wind."

Hamill gestured toward his own domain. "The Randalls don't ride this country much."

"That's why I'm here."

"But if the Randall outfit should happen to be tracking down a peace officer, none of the Hamills will stop them."

"Fair enough," said Pete. "If any peace officers show up, you can bet I won't be anywhere in sight."

Judson Hamill stared hard at the youth squatting beside the fire. "Same if the Randalls were to show up?"

"That would be different. I reckon they're out to get me. That will be my own private party."

Saying nothing as to whether Young Pete could continue camping on his land or would have to move on, Judson Hamill reined round and rode back into the timber. Pete poured himself a second cup of coffee. Hamill, he was sure, would not inform the Randalls of his whereabouts. Whether or not the mountain man suspected him of being a peace officer, Young Pete was not so sure. Hamill was shrewd, and probably knew more about present circumstances than he seemed to know. Young Pete decided to stay where he was until some move of the outlaws forced him to another location.

HE SPENT most of the day watching the stone house in the canyon. Meanwhile, one of the outlaws sat with a rifle on his knees guarding the canyon trail below. Men came out of the stone house, filled the trough at the corral, packed feed to the horses, and spent their time loafing. Toward evening the guard rose and stood looking down the canyon. A

half hour later, after answering a signal, a rider appeared. There were now five men at the outlaw headquarters, and eight horses in the corral. Without being able to identify the recent arrival, Pete surmised that it was Ed Randall. With their leader present the outlaws would doubtless make some new move, governed largely, Pete reasoned, by what their leader had been able to find out in town. Pete asked himself what effect Harper's disappearance would have. Would the gang take to tracking and finally locate his present camp, or would they ignore the mound of stones in the foothills and simply look out for themselves?

Just before sundown two men came out of the stone house. One of them gestured across the canyon toward Young Pete's camp. The other raised his hands to his eyes. Pete caught the glint of field glass lenses. He could easily have lain back on

the rim rock, out of sight. But as he had already planned a second big move in his campaign, he sat still.

Before dark he made a fairly big fire on the rim, cooked supper, and packing hastily, struck west through the timberland, his fire on the rim rock still bright in the night shadows. Reaching the crest of the range he dropped down the western slope, staked his pack horse, and rode round the head of the canyon to the north side. Some twenty or thirty yards back in the brush he dismounted and sat down, the reins in his hand. In the thin chill air he had no difficulty in keeping awake. Reasoning that the outlaws would investigate his camp on the opposite side of the canyon, Young Pete wore down the tedious hours waiting. About midnight he heard the unmistakable sound of hoofs. Dim in the moonlight, two riders passed on the trail below him, rounded the upper end of the canyon and disappeared in the timber. When they reappeared on the rim rock near his camp he tied his horse in the brush. Taking off his boots Pete made his way down the trail. He had just reached the corral above the stone house when the door swung open and someone stepped out. Pete dropped in the shadow of the water trough. The horses snorted and circled. Pete held his breath. Cursing the horses, the man turned and walked back to the house. Rising, Pete let down the corral bars and waved his hat. With a rush and roar the horses stampeded down the canyon.

YOUNG PETE turned and ran. Behind him rose the sound of men rushing about, of voices sharp with surprise. The pool of moonlight through which the outlaws had passed on the preceding night at an earlier hour, had widened. As Young Pete sped through it a rifle barked. A slug whistled past his head and spattered on an angle of the canyon wall. Again the rifle barked, but Young Pete had rounded the bend in the trail. He slowed down to a steady trot. Leaving the trail he climbed through the brush to his horse, mounted and crossing the crest rode down into San Dimas Valley. Two of the outlaws were afoot. Six of the eight horses were loose, probably making for the desert below. It would take some time to catch them up. Pete's pack horse was staked on the San Dimas side of the range. Arriving at his camp, Young Pete moved both horses to another location and managed to get an hour's sleep before daybreak.

That morning while he was watering his horses at the valley stream, a curl of smoke broke above the timber of the range. Finally the smoke grew dense and black, bulging over the distant tree tops, and moving slowly west in the light breeze. While safe enough in the valley, Young Pete was

curious as to what might have caused the fire. Like most mountain men, the Hamills were careful about fire. The smoke came from somewhere in the neighborhood of their homestead.

As Pete watched, a band of horses broke across the distant crest of the range and rocketed down into the valley. Too far away to read the brand, he surmised they were Hamill stock. The smoke seemed to grow less dense, finally subsiding to a thin yellow haze. Aware that in the valley he might be spotted from some crag or ridge, he had already decided to take to the high trails, circle the Hamill homestead and make his way back to the south rim of the canyon opposite the stone house. Only by constantly moving camp could he hope to keep from being ambushed. By this time the Randall gang would be only too well aware that someone was after them. It was a case of keeping out of their way, and in their way until he either wore them down, or they got him.

REASONING that it was his last chance to make good, to come clear of the law and settle down to some quiet occupation, Young Pete went at his job with the calculating mind of an accomplished chess player. He knew the game from both sides, and knew the odds against him. One mistake would probably end the game. And he didn't intend to make it.

His next move was apparently irrelevant, yet he had his reason for it. Riding down the valley to where the stampeded horses had crossed, he back-tracked them up the eastern slope. The smell of smoke came to him as he topped the crest. Films of ash drifted down through the trees. Alert for a surprise, he rode slowly through the timberland. When he came within sight of the Hamill homestead, set in a wide, grassy clearing, he pulled up and sat his horse, wondering how it had happened. The big log cabin, the sheds and outbuildings were burned to the ground. Tiny flames still played about the fallen timbers. Flecks of ash floated in the air. A breeze ruffled the tree tops. The yellow haze cleared. The bars of the big corral, which had escaped the flames, were down. A man lay near the charred logs that had been the cabin. Still fearing some kind of a trap, Young Pete sat his horse watching. The man's hand moved as if signaling for help. Slowly Pete pulled his carbine from the scabbard. Slowly he rode forward, watching the timber edging the clearing. Within a few feet of the prostrate figure he reined up. The man on the ground was Judson Hamill. He raised on his elbow, tried to speak. His black beard twitched and his head fell back.

The mountain man's Winchester lay near him. Round about were scattered eight or ten empty shells. Tracks of plunging hoofs showed in the earth in front of the charred cabin. More empty shells glittered in the sunlight. Near the log stable Pete found the bullet riddled body of Judson Hamill's brother. Both the Hamills had died fighting.

PETE tried to picture the fight—Judson Hamill and his brother surprised by two mounted men, who according to the tracks near the cabin had not dismounted; an argument of some kind, and a battle. That the corralled horses had been turned loose after the Hamills had been shot down, was plainly evident. But why had they been turned loose? The earth round the corral gate was so heavily tracked that it told no special story. But out in the clearing Pete discovered that the mounted men had departed with two led horses. Keeping within the timber, Young Pete followed their trail out to the rim of the canyon. Too far back from the rim to see the stone house, he could see the upper end of the canyon trail as it neared the crest. Nothing showed on the trail. About to turn back, he glanced up and down the stretch of rim rock in front of him. The glint of a saddle gun caught his eye. Pete was puzzled. No one riding that country would leave a rifle

behind unless there was a mighty good reason to do so.

Still keeping within the timber he rode west until almost opposite the carbine on the rim rock. Huddled at the base of a big pine, lay Sarg, the railroad man who had joined the wild bunch. Wounded in the fight with the Hamills he had fallen from the saddle, dropped his carbine, and had then crawled to the timber. And there his companion, whoever he might have been, had left him.

Bending over the wounded man, Young Pete saw that he had been shot through the chest twice. He was unconscious and could not last long.

BART RANDALL, Harper, Sarg and the man wounded in the raid were out of it. Still remained four of the gang to be accounted for. Riding back to the Hamill homestead Young Pete dug a trench near the charred logs. He buried Judson Hamill and his brother. He worked fast, never taking it for granted that the Randall gang would not return to the clearing. An hour later he was back on the south rim of the canyon, near the spot where Sarg's carbine lay. Absorbed in watching the stone house, Young Pete was startled by a shuffling sound. Whirling, he saw a figure staggering toward him. It was Sarg, hands outstretched as though feeling his way in the dark. Shot through the body, and dying on his feet, he was evidently unaware of anyone near him. "Water," he gasped tonelessly. "Water."

Young Pete stepped to his horse and unslung his canteen. "Here you are, Sarg," he said, unscrewing the canteen cap. But the wounded outlaw did not seem to either see or hear. Slowly he lurched past Young Pete, groping blindly in the sunlight.

"Hold on!" cried Pete as Sarg kept on. "Sarg!" he called sharply. Standing within a few feet of the canyon rim, the outlaw hesitated, as if about to turn. Pete jumped forward, grasped his arm. Sarg jerked free. "Water," he mumbled, as he lurched forward and toppled into the chasm below.

For a moment Young Pete stood as though paralyzed. The flicker of a lizard across the rim rock brought him back to himself. Picking up Sarg's carbine he examined the magazine. It was empty. Recalling how it had been emptied, he hurled the carbine out into space.

A few minutes later he saw four men leave the stone house across the canyon and ride toward the crest. Evidently the gang was heading for San Dimas Valley, possibly leaving the country. Once below the border it would take months of trailing to locate them. Mounting, Young Pete cut through the timberland, passed the Hamill clearing and nearing the ridge trail of the range, waited to see if the outlaws would come along the ridge or ride the valley trail below. For an hour he watched and waited, unaware that the gang had crossed the San Dimas Valley and had ridden up the opposite slope, instead of heading either north or south. Finally Young Pete rode down to where he had left his pack horse. Stake rope, pack horse and provisions were gone.

Where they had gone was not difficult to determine. The tracks near the river bed showed where five animals had crossed the stream, three shod horses and two unshod. "Got my eyes left, anyhow," muttered Pete as he began to trail the horses up the western slope of the San Dimas.

TO BE out of provisions and blankets, and riding an uninhabited country was no new experience to The Tonto Kid. He had a good horse under him, and arms and ammunition. He also had papers and tobacco. Heretofore he had not dared smoke. Now he curled a cigarette, and with his gaze on the brush-covered hillside before him, followed the plain trail of the five horses, three shod, two unshod. The unshod horses, he reasoned, had belonged to the Hamills. No doubt the Randall gang would tack shoes on them the first

chance they got. They would have to if they expected the Hamill mounts to last long in the desert country.

About an hour later Young Pete reached the crest of the range. He was not surprised to see, far out in the desert below, a cavalcade making for the town of Carmelita, an outpost on the edge of the Bad Lands. Carmelita was populated largely by Mexicans. Brinkley, an ex-cattleman, ran the general store. He had a hard name. The kind of man, reasoned Pete, who for policy alone would be friendly toward the Randall outfit. With a decidedly unfavorable prospect before him, Pete rode down the western slope. But not as a peace officer. Half way down the slope he unfastened his deputy star and shied it into the brush. "This here," he told his horse, "is what Slim would call a strictly personal matter. Somehow, I kinda like it better that way."

Fading sunlight lay on the low adobes, the littered streets, and the weathered general store of Carmelita. Round about

spread the desert, stripped of greasewood near the town, criss-crossed by goat trails and meandering wagon roads. Shiftlessness and poverty were as apparent as though printed on a signboard. Mongrels of all sizes lay in the dust of the main street, or against the crumbling adobe walls. From a desert well, not much more than a square hole in the ground, planked on the sides, the natives drew their supply of water and carried it to their homes. Adjoining the store stood a squat adobe with a blue door—the saloon. Storekeeper Brinkley's partner ran the saloon. An occasional freighter hauled supplies through Carmelita to the distant cowtown of Rodney. An occasional buckboard passed through the town, and once in a while a cowhand. Otherwise Carmelita was as isolated as a pinnacle in the Bad Lands.

FAR out on the desert Young Pete waited until dark before approaching the town. He smoked to dull his hunger, and to amuse himself, talked to his pony. "Long haul and no grass, eh Buck? Mebby so you'll have to eat frijoles when we hit Carmelita. But you'll eat. I said it.

"Mebby so the Randall bunch kept right on goin'. That would be bad."

Buck mouthed his bit. He wanted water.

"If they're bushin' in town tonight, one of 'em will be watchin' the back trail. What do you say if we was to ride round and come into town from the west. Think that would be healthier?"

To the stout little buckskin it didn't matter. All he knew was that he was hungry and needed water. He could see no reason for standing there in the sunset shadows, his rider sitting at his feet smoking a cigarette.

"They got our pack horse, and some grub," Young Pete nodded toward the distant town. "That pack horse belongs to Buck Yardlaw. We got to do somethin' about it. Chucked my badge in the brush myself. All they got to do now is to get you," he looked up at the pony, "and my gun, and I'll be all washed up and ready for buryin'."

Pete caught himself thinking of Judson Hamill and his brother, of Harper and Sarg, and Horsethief Canyon. A man didn't last too long riding the high trails. He himself had been lucky. He had taken about every chance a man could take, and aside from having been wounded in two gun fights, had come through without a scratch. Sometimes it happened that way. But not often.

There were four of the Randall gang still going: Ed Randall, Lindquist the

Pecos cowboy, Stevens and White Eye Johnson. The outlaw wounded in the recent raid was, according to eye witnesses of the fight, Bill Page. His body lay at the bottom of Horsethief Canyon. Young Pete glanced toward the distant desert town, a vague outline in the gathering darkness. "White Eye Johnson and Ed Randall—I'd like to take 'em in and turn 'em over to Yardlaw. But shucks! Buck himself would have to knock 'em out and rope 'em to a buckboard and freight 'em in. And I ain't got a buckboard."

If he were lucky enough to clean up the gang, what proof, thought Pete, would the governor have that the Randall bunch was wiped out? None, except his word. Of course time would tell the story. But a whole lot could happen before folks finally realized that the Randall gang was actually out of existence.

PETE rose and gathering the reins, mounted. "We got to do this job quick. That's all. Tryin' to put 'em under arrest would be a joke. And the joke would be on me."

The Tonto Kid saw no romance in his work, no glory if he cleaned up the gang. It was simply a job, like roping out salty broncs and riding them. It was his own fault if he got piled.

The desert stars shone high and clear when Young Pete stepped from his horse and led him up to the first adobe on the west side of Carmelita. A few houses down the street several horses stood tied to a hitch rail. With one exception the horses were saddled. The exception was Pete's pack horse. They belonged to strangers in town, he learned. The young Mexican girl he talked with laughed in the starlight. "You also are a stranger, no?"

Swarthy, black-haired, and speaking Mexican like a native, he could easily have passed as one of her country. "Yes, I'm a stranger. Got lost, out yonder. Saw this town and rode in. If I could get something to eat, and some water and feed for my horse—" Pete took some silver from his pocket—"perhaps you could help me?"

"But there is the store. And there is water at the well."

"I know. But I can't go in the store. Those fellows," Pete lowered his voice, "are after me."

For a moment the girl studied Pete's face. "I will get food for you. But from my father's house, not from the store. The men in the store are bad men. They would talk to me. I am pretty, am I not?"

"Pretty as a speckled pup under a yellow wagon," blurted Pete. "But you don't savvy American talk. Like a rose," he added in Spanish.

"I will bring the food and the water, and no one shall see me."

Pete gestured. "I'll be waiting—out yonder."

IT WAS a long chance, and Pete had to take it. Carmelita was so small a town that should he appear on the street, his presence would soon be remarked. If the Mexican girl didn't talk, he would be safe for the present. If the girl talked—well, the buckskin pony would have another long trip without food or water.

The girl came stealthily through the shadows. She gave Young Pete some food. She had filled his canteen at the well. "The men in the store want shoes for their horses," she told him in Spanish. "There are no shoes. They have sent for my father who does the work of a blacksmith. They have told him he must make shoes. But he has not the iron. These men from the San Dimas country do not speak with reason. They are drunk."

"That's good," said Young Pete laconically.

"But it is not good! My father is afraid of these men."

"Kind of scared of 'em myself," said Pete smiling. "Suppose you go back to your house and forget all about me. Here's something to buy you a new dress with."

The girl took the money, two dollars,

which to her was a fortune. Young Pete seemed like a being sent by the saints—one who gave much money, yet asked nothing. For a moment she hesitated, gazing at the dark young stranger. "Is that all I may do for you?" she said finally.

Pete grinned. "You might give me a kiss. But I'm not beggin' you for it."

The girl was gone. Pete brushed his lips with the back of his hand. Taking the reins he led his thirsty pony round to the well back of the store. From down the desert came the rumbling and clack of a freighter's wagon. In Brinkley's store there was loud talking and an occasional burst of harsh laughter. Pete's pony raised a dripping muzzle and gazed toward the approaching wagon. The freighter would have supplies for the cowtown of Rodney. As there was no water between Carmelita and Rodney, he would make camp in Carmelita. Chances were he would have a supply of blacksmith's iron and horseshoes. The gang could now get their horses shod without any difficulty. The wagon was still several hundred yards east of town. Someone in the gang would soon step out to see who was coming. Young Pete mounted and rode toward the oncoming wagon.

JUST outside Carmelita he hailed the teamster. "Got any corn or anything a fella could use for horse feed?"

The man on the high seat nodded. "Don't figure to unload till I get in," he mumbled.

Young Pete's pulse quickened. There was something slightly familiar about the teamster's manner and his voice. Pete hated to be taken by surprise. "Suppose you quit chewin' tobacco and talk human," he blurted.

The teamster laughed. "So they didn't get you after all?"

"Not me. What in hell you doin' up in this country, Buck?"

"Freighting."

"Been doin' some trackin' too, I reckon."

"Some."

"Where's the regular freighter?"

"At Big South Bend. He'll wait till he hears from me."

Young Pete was regaining his poise. His old enemy, Sheriff Buck Yardlaw, evidently had trailed him to the Horsethief Canyon country, read sign to advantage and was now for some very good reason playing the part of a freighter. Surmising that Yardlaw was also out to clean up the Randall gang, on old scores, he said so.

Yardlaw shook his head. "That's your job. I'm after the men who murdered Jud Hamill and his brother."

Pete gestured toward Carmelita. "You'll find one of 'em yonder. The other, he's at the bottom of Horsethief Canyon."

"How many in this bunch?"

"Four. As I figure it, they are Ed Randall, Lindquist, White Eye, and Rud Stevens."

"Looks like you been busy."

"I had luck."

The tired horses fretted to get to water. "I'm camping at the well," said Yardlaw.

"Mebby I could help you unhitch."

"Mebby you could."

"I'll ride round and meet you," said Pete. "The gang are short on horseshoes. They'll be askin' you for some."

THE arrival of the freight wagon aroused no suspicion among the gang. White Eye Johnson came out of the store and asked the teamster if he had any horseshoes, and when he would be pulling out in the morning. The teamster replied that he had shoes, that he would not pull out until late in the morning, as he had to repair the wagon reach before starting. White Eye went back into the store.

Unhitched, the eight horses stood tied to the feed trailer. Young Pete, on foot, stood near Yardlaw. Solid as a rock, the big sheriff gazed at The Tonto Kid for a moment. "Got plenty?"

"Shells? Yes."

"Want to go after 'em now—or wait till morning?"

"I been thinkin' about that. You flip a coin."

Pete called heads, struck a match and gazed at the coin in Yardlaw's hand. "All right, Buck. I had a hunch somethin' was on for tonight. Ed Randall is the fastest gun. White Eye ain't slow, so I've heard. Let's get busy."

BEFORE entering Brinkley's store, Yardlaw and Young Pete carefully and noiselessly braced a stout post against the rear door, so that no one could leave the building at that end. Just before they came round to the front Young Pete took off his sombrero and hung it on a fence post. He might need it again, and he might not. Gray with alkali, gaunt and tall, Yardlaw strode round to the front of the building, Young Pete beside him. It was a warm night. The store door was open. Together they stepped in. "I hear somebody wants to see me," said Yardlaw.

Young Pete's eye traveled round the room. Ed Randall, leader of the outlaws, was sitting sideways on the counter talking with the storekeeper, Brinkley. White Eye Johnson sat astraddle of a chair facing the doorway. Stevens and Lindquist, a bottle between them, stood near the lower end of the counter.

"Where's Jamison?" said the storekeeper quickly, naming the regular freighter.

"Resting up at Big South Bend." Yardlaw answered Brinkley, but he kept his eyes on Ed Randall.

Lindquist and Stevens set their glasses down. Young Pete saw that Randall had recognized him, yet Pete was watching White Eye Johnson's hands.

"How many shoes do you want?" Yardlaw's question seemed filled with a double meaning. "Cold shoes, you said."

"I can use about eight," said Randall easily. At any minute the tension would break, and the outlaws would go into action. Young Pete, whose unspoken motto was The Sooner The Better, laughed. "Eight shoes would be four too many if you're lookin' for luck."

For once in his life, Ed Randall seemed to be stricken with sort of paralysis. Had either Yardlaw or The Tonto Kid shown up alone, it is possible the outlaw would have gone for his gun the minute he saw them. Yardlaw took a step toward him. Still no one in the room made a move. Another step, and Yardlaw swung his sombrero and slapped Randall in the face. Young Pete heard the crash of their guns.

His own hand was up and busy. Twice he fired. White Eye Johnson sagged along the counter, grasped it and sank to his knees. Lindquist turned and dashed for the rear door. But his companion Stevens had his gun out and going. One of his shots struck Yardlaw, who flinched, and then walked slowly toward him, firing as he came. Brinkley, dropping behind the counter, fired through it. As the splinters sprang up round the hole, Young Pete threw a shot which bored another hole within an inch of it. Pete's gun was empty, and Stevens, though hit hard, was still firing. Suddenly Yardlaw dropped his own gun and collapsed. Young Pete dove for it and came up. Twice it flashed. Stevens staggered toward the front door and fell across the threshold.

Lindquist, the Pecos cowboy, stood with his hands in the air. Young Pete walked up to him, took his gun, and jerking it up knocked him down and out. Smoke hung in a blue haze round the two ceiling lamps. Out in the street a dog howled. Pete walked round the counter. "Come on out and show yourself," he called. But

Brinkley, drilled through the stomach, was unable to move.

BOLTING the front door, Young Pete raised Yardlaw's head. The sheriff had been hit twice, but it was the slug that plowed through his scalp that had downed him. The wound in his shoulder was high, and not serious.

The storekeeper died before sunrise. Randall, White Eye Johnson and Stevens had been killed in the fight. Lindquist, the Pecos cowboy, was the only one to escape being hit. He lay hogtied in the room back of the main store.

Two days Young Pete stayed in Carmelita. The third day following the fight, Yardlaw was able to travel. Mounted on the pick of the outlaws' horses the sheriff and Young Pete headed for San Dimas Valley, Lindquist handcuffed, riding a few yards ahead. Asked why he had not put the outlaw out of business during the fight, Young Pete replied that Lindquist was the only member of the gang alive, and the only witness, aside from himself, that could prove the rest of the gang had been exterminated. "It ain't as if I was a peace officer," said Pete. "I chucked my star before I hit Carmelita. Them fellas stole one of my horses. That was plenty excuse for me."

"So you figured Lindquist will turn state's evidence?"

"Figured he was the yellowest dog in the bunch. He'll talk. Then the governor will know I played my hand like I said I would."

WHILE crossing San Dimas Valley, Young Pete rode aside long enough to look at the mound of stone underneath which lay the body of Black Joe Harper. To Pete's surprise he found a roughly hewn headboard and on it penciled "The Tonto Kid." He surmised that Yardlaw had found the grave and had so marked it. Pete recalled Yardlaw's "So they didn't get you after all?" He rode back to where the sheriff waited.

"Buck," Pete hesitated and glanced away, "we been gunnin' for each other for quite a spell."

This was no news to Yardlaw, but that Young Pete should mention it, seemed strange. The sheriff nodded.

"I just took a look at that headboard where Joe Harper is planted. It wasn't there when I planted him. I notice it's got my name on it."

"Somebody made a mistake."

"Mebby." Young Pete looked the sheriff in the eye. "I never reckoned you would take that kind of trouble for me."

"Hell, Pete! I said somebody made a mistake."

"Somebody. Buck Yardlaw, mebby. Thought the gang had got me, so he does some fancy carvin', for a friend."

"For a friend who did some fancy shooting when I was down and the guns still going."

"But that headboard was there before the shootin' started. What I mean, I ain't no more peace officer than a coyote. It ain't my game. Now I figure you're feelin' healthy enough to take Lindquist on in, and pry some talk out of him. If the governor wants to make out that pardon, tell him to hand it to Slim Akers—and Slim will send it to me."

"Scared to ride back to the capital?"

Young Pete's face went red. "Yes. I'm scared. Scared of myself. Not that I'd be lookin' for trouble. But some other folks might. And there's only one way of settlin' them kind."

Sheriff Yardlaw thought he understood. Perhaps it would be just as well if The Tonto Kid kept out of sight for a year or two. The sheriff thrust out his hand. Young Pete seized it, and turned away. "So long, Buck." Pete grinned. "Tell Slim for me, to go to hell, and I'll meet him there, one of these days." Pete reined his horse round. The Pecos cowboy, Lindquist, stared at him.

"Heading south?" said Yardlaw as Pete rode down the valley.

Young Pete turned and nodded. "Headin' South."

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Chapter I

LYNCH-LAW

THE sins of his past had finally caught up with Phil Kesler to judge him, condemn him and finally to hang him. Range law had merely served as the court of hearing; a good hemp rope was only the means by which punishment had been exacted for Phil Kesler had shaped his own life—gambled with fate in a game that could have but one outcome—stark, violent death! His lax, furtive demeanor had first laid him open to suspicion while later his total disregard for accusations and opinions sealed his doom, for out of his past stalked the unsavory charges of horse stealing and cattle rustling to unite in a destructive unit, the power of which was evidenced by the sight of Kesler's silent figure swinging eerily from the limb of a cottonwood tree.

Randy Reid had been viewing the silent, spiritless figure of Phil Kesler from the back of his big, roan horse; now he dismounted, let the reins trail and covered the distance between horse and the trunk of the tree, his intention being to cut the rope that held the body suspended in mid-air. But the best intentions can go awry and Randy's took a sudden turn toward self-preservation as an angry, searching bullet bit into the bark of the cottonwood not over six inches from his inquisitive nose.

The sharp report of a carbine had scarcely died away before Randy had leaped to put the tree between himself and the ambushed person with the homicidal notions. Chips of bark flying from the tree as more slugs were thrown his way told Randy that he had not acted without reason and prudence, for whoever was working the lever of the carbine wasn't shooting just to scare him. Instead there

Rustling Is Good While It Lasts, but There's No Escaping the Law—and the Innocent Suffer with the Guilty

was a deadly earnestness of purpose behind the shots as though the marksman was putting into practice the old adage, "an eye for an eye" or perhaps a bullet for a neck, depending largely upon how you looked at it. Randy, however, wasn't doing any looking at all. He was hugging the tree trunk, counting the shots and thanking providence that he was built along slender, elevated lines instead of running to the wider contours which might have overlapped the thickness of the tree.

MEANWHILE he was awaiting his opportunity to move. It came when a sudden lull in the shooting told him that the carbine was empty. But, instead of jerking his Colt and wading bull-headed and perhaps dramatically into action, Randy chose the unglorified course of fading straight back from the cottonwood until he reached a screening shelter of live oaks and manzanita. Nor did he pause once his body was lost from view. Safety had been the initial motive behind his move, but once concealed, curiosity took hold of him—he wanted to get a look at, and maybe a shot at, the ambitious individual with the carbine.

He moved fast, yet warily, bending a course that took him back up the gulch and across Cottonwood Creek to the opposite slope which broke gently back from the bed of the little creek. He halted in the confines of a thicket and gazed down upon the gallows-tree from the angle at which the bushwhacker had been looking at it, though he now judged himself to be behind the other party whose present location could only be guessed at.

Randy had been grimly intent upon carrying out his own plans, yet in circling he had endeavored to keep a sharp lookout for any new move on the other's part. He had seen one. But this was far from reassuring, for the slopes on both sides of the creek were littered with rocks and brush relieved only by an occasional thicket of live oaks.

This was Block K range and close to where it bordered on "Buck" Buckley's Lazy B, so whoever had strung up Phil Kesler had been wily enough to do it on Kesler's own land, thus killing all suspicion from that angle for, although this was strictly cow-country—untamed, uncouth and still free from the polluting influx of grafting politicians—due respect was given Sheriff Dave Brawley who possessed a quick gun hand, a strong, unbending will and a code of ethics that frowned on the hot-headed, hair-triggered practice of lynching.

A glimpse of his horse standing where he had left him assured Randy that he was not stranded here afoot. The horse, like Randy, had weathered a barrage or two of lead before this and unless nicked he would remain ground-tied, nervous perhaps with senses alert, but nevertheless true to his training.

RANDY now drew his gun and with it balanced in his right hand he went slowly forward in the general direction of the creek, testing each footstep cautiously before throwing his weight on it. It was slow work. Twice he had to alter his course when dense clumps of brush, too thorny and treacherous to penetrate, loomed up in his path and abruptly, due to these detours, he halted thinking that he had over-reached. It was well that he did for his keen gaze suddenly picked up what proved to be the back of a blue demin shirt half-veiled by the low-hanging branches of a clump of bushes. So close was he upon his quarry that Randy's grip tightened on his gun.

But, before he could speak, utter a command, the blue-shirted figure turned. Randy's arm went up, his body hurtled through space as though released on a coiled spring. He caught a glimpse of a white, startled face where wide, blue eyes stared up with fright at his descending body. A scream, unmistakably feminine, rent the air. Randy was able to check the deadly arc of his down-flashing

gun but only with an effort that threw him off balance.

He heard a cry of anguish or fright as his big body crashed into the lighter one whom he now knew to be a girl. In trying to save her a possible fracture of bones he ducked his head and somersaulted. Brush whipped and tore at his face, a sharp, gouging rock made a wicked effort to unjoint his backbone as he came to rest and lay for a second spreadeagled wondering what was going to happen next.

AS HIS head cleared he rolled over on his stomach and turned quizzical eyes toward the girl. Apparently she was not hurt for she had gained her feet and was now coming at him with the carbine held club-fashion by the end of the barrel. One glance was all that Randy needed to know that she meant business. He rolled, gained his feet the second time over and stepped in close to catch hold of the gun as it descended. He was none too gentle as he wrenched it away from her and stepped back to consider her gravely.

"You murderer!" she cried brokenly. "You coward!" her lower lip quivered. Tears gathered at the corners of her eyes, rolled down her smooth cheeks.

Randy said nothing, merely stood staring at her. She was disarmed and that was all that was worrying him for the present. It was plain that she was distraught; laboring under the strain of some great emotion that he knew wasn't fear and he had doubts about it being anger.

It was not surprising that he had mistaken her for a man. She was garbed in man's attire even down to the boots that encased her feet. They were old, run-over at the heels and quite evidently several sizes too large for her. The Levi overalls were new but the denim shirt was old and faded, yet at the present time clean. It, like the boots, was several sizes too big for her. Randy had no chance to dwell on her features for she suddenly buried them in her hands and sank in a forlorn heap to the ground. Nevertheless, he did notice that she had been generously endowed with a mop of dark, auburn hair that had been cut short until it barely measured on a line with the lower tips of her ears.

Pulling his gaze from her Randy gave his attention to the carbine that he now held in his hands. As he had suspected,

it was empty. Obviously she had brought no extra cartridges with her. Standing the gun against the crotch of a nearby bush he squatted on his heels, got out a thin sack of tobacco, a book of wheatstraw papers and went about rolling a cigarette.

THE girl sitting there crying bothered him. He wanted to say something to her, comfort her, but he seemed tongue-tied which was perhaps just as well for consoling a grief-stricken girl is an art in itself. At length she ceased crying of her own volition as he hoped she would. The tears had brought about a change in her. They had marked the let-down from some great strain and though she now appeared to have regained her composure, the defiance was gone. In its place was bitterness etched around the corners of her mouth and smoldering in her reddened eyes.

Randy smoked in silence while he raked her face with level, searching gaze. His own features remained unmoved, none of his thoughts reflected themselves. She was the one to finally break the silence.

"I hope you are satisfied," she said in a listless, flat voice. "I'm glad now that I missed. I'd hate to answer for killing

anything as low and cowardly as you!"

"I'm likewise glad yuh missed," said Randy thoughtfully. "But not for the same reason. For never having seen me before you've got a pretty stout opinion of me, ain't yuh?"

"What if I haven't seen you before!" she flared with a return of some of her spirit. "I know the brand on your horse. How many more cowards over at the Double R did it take to hang my brother!"

"So you're Phil Kesler's sister," mused Randy as though answering aloud a question he had been asking himself. "I remember now them tellin' about yuh. You'll have to excuse me, Miss, on bein' kinda thick between the ears about some things. I been gone from this country three, four years. Only got back a couple weeks ago so I'm plumb hazy on a lotta things."

"Whoever you are I notice you've been here long enough to take a hand in murder!" she flashed.

"Randy Reid's the name an' I didn't have a blamed thing to do with killin' your brother," he denied evenly. "I'll build that loop a mite an' add that nobody on the Double R had anything to do with it. Whatever we might be over there we ain't a nest of yellow polecats. But that's whatever. I'm wonderin' why you was bushed down here with a .30-.30 ready to crack down on the first ranny who came this way?"

"Because I knew some of you would return," she answered. "A killer always returns to gloat over his victim."

"You been readin' too many of them detective stories," snorted Randy. "This ain't no place for a girl. You better get along home. I'll take care of your brother."

"You've already done that!" she cried. "Can't you even let him alone after he's dead?"

"Your nerves are shot," drawled Randy. "It ain't a woman's job to look after him. I'm makin' it mine. I'll likewise notify the sheriff an' coroner—somethin' you should have done instead of waitin' here for somebody who ain't liable to come within a mile of this spot again. Here," he handed her the carbine. "Take your gun an' go on home. There ain't any more you can do here."

THERE was logic in his words. There was nothing more that she could do. Her carbine was empty and she couldn't fight this man barehanded even had she wanted to, which she didn't. It was dawning on her that he was different from the other men she had met since coming to this country a year previously. His eyes were level, steady. They had measured her—were doing so now—but not in a way that made her conscious of her sex. His manner throughout had been impersonal, yet in a way it was gentle after their first violent contact.

His last words came low and mild to her ears yet she detected a command behind them. Apparently he was a man used to having his own way. There was a strength of determination about him that was felt rather than seen. Strangely enough she found her will bending to his. Without a word she took the carbine from his hands, turned her back upon him and disappeared in the brush, her steps taking her in the general direction of the Block K buildings which lay just over the ridge at the head of a long, extended mesa.

Randy made his way down the slope, crossed the creek, and once again approached the cottonwood tree. This time he succeeded in cutting down the swinging body. There were no marks on it except where the strangling rope had burnt and bruised the neck. Randy removed Phil Kesler's coat, dragged the body back to a shaded nook made by the overhanging foliage of a clump of bushes and dropped the coat over the hideous, discolored face.

He looked around for signs then, reading what he could from the spots where the carpet of dry leaves and twigs out away from the sheltering cottonwood had been kicked up. In the bottom of the creek at a distance of twenty feet or so below

the cottonwood tree he found a six-shooter. Five chambers were loaded, the one under the hammer being empty. Evidently it was Phil Kesler's gun for the holster at the man's hip was empty.

PIECING things together Randy dedecided that Kesler had come here unsuspecting, had been overpowered and his gun thrown away before he realized his danger. Then his hands had been tied behind him with the string of buckskin that he used for a belt, a noose had been tossed over his head and the other end dallied around a saddle horn.

Satisfied that he had seen everything of importance close at hand, Randy looped the reins of his horse over one arm and struck off on the trail of a lone horse that took him diagonally across the west ridge before it turned in a straight line toward the Lazy B. But his luck didn't hold out. He lost the trail on the hard, rocky floor of a dry wash that marked the boundary between the Block K and the Lazy B.

Emerging from the wash he rode one bank, crossed to the other side, and rode the other searching for the spot where the horseman had come up out of the wash. He found what he thought the place but gave up all hope of tracking the fellow further for the spot was a regular trail crossing the wash. He found imprints of shod hoofs and those of barefoot horses. Some were old, others new and they pointed in both directions. From the sign he judged that a band of at least a dozen horses had crossed here not later than early morning, their course pointing east.

Without a doubt the murderer of Phil Kesler had headed his horse out of the wash in the same direction knowing that his trail would be lost among the others. In softer ground and with a few less tracks Randy might have been able to determine the hoof marks of the horse that was packing a man. As it was he gave it up as a lost cause and turned his own horse back toward the Lazy B.

THE ranch cook came out to greet him as he rode into the yard. Buck Buckley was a bachelor by choice instead of necessity and though the ranch boasted a big, split-log house, Buckley practically lived with his men, taking all his meals at the cookhouse and spending more of his nights on a board bunk down in the bunkhouse than he did on the spring bed up in one of the rooms of the house.

"Damned if it ain't Randy Reid!" exclaimed the cook upon seeing Randy. He wiped the flour from one of his hairy paws and shoved it toward Randy. "Heard you was home," he grinned. "Yo're gittin' to be dang nigh a stranger t' this country. How long yuh home for?"

"The rest of my life if Dad an' Rusty have their way," grinned Randy.

"I ain't never heard about you bein' shy on yore own ideas," winked the cook.

"You got the roamin' fever in yore blood—usta have it m'self. Humph," he pulled a false scowl. "Reckon you rode plumb over here just to say howdy to me—or was it that apple pie that I just dragged outa the oven that yuh smelt?"

"Sho, I can't lie," chuckled Randy, his eyes lighting. "It was the pie." He sent a glance traveling around the yard. "Buck around?"

"Nope. Left early this mornin' an' ain't got back yet."

"Out with the boys, eh?"

"Might be by this time but he didn't leave with 'em. They're shiftin' a herd on the south range. If yuh come up thataway it's a wonder yuh didn't see them."

"I headed north onto the Block K from

our place an' angled over here from there," explained Randy.

THE cook's brows raised. "Was it that no 'count Phil Kesler you was hopin' to meet or that fiery, red-headed sister of hisn? She's got the whole blamed country to talkin'. Folks can't quite figger her. Ain't never seen her m'self an' from what I've heard I ain't wantin' to."

"What's the matter with her?" questioned Randy.

"Too much of a hell-cat, I reckon," the cook laughed reflectively. "The boys—them that's had the nerve to try—claim she's most as ornery as her brother an' that's sumpin'. An ornerier polecat never lived than Phil Kesler. It's surprisin' to me the Old Man don't kill him for kiote bait."

"Buck been havin' trouble with him too?" Randy asked carelessly, his fingers busy rolling a cigarette.

"Wal, outside of Kesler stealin' his hosses an' cows I guess the Old Man ain't had what yuh might call trouble with the young hellion. Yore Dad an' Rusty have been havin' some trouble with him over hoss stealin', ain't they?"

"Yuh never have trouble with a horse thief till yuh know dang well who he is," drawled Randy. "Then yuh just kinda blast him into hell out of respect for good horseflesh. Reckon as usual Rusty's been talkin' too much."

He lighted his cigarette and stuck his foot in the stirrup.

"Ain't leavin' awready, are yuh?" queried the cook. "That pie's a mite hot yet, but if yuh stick around a while——"

"Thanks. I'll pick it up my next time around," declined Randy. "Gotta sift along to town now."

"I'll tell the boss you was askin' for him."

"Nothin' important," shrugged Randy. "Was just gonna swap lies with him a while if he was here. So long."

The cook gazed after him until he had dropped from sight.

"Humph," he grunted, running a probing forefinger through the stubble on his cheek. "Somethin' on that ranny's mind. Any time he turns down apple pie." He went back into his kitchen grumbling to himself.

Chapter II

NO-GOOD RUSTLER

LUPINE, the county seat, lay sprawled in the palm of a wide, hot valley approximately twelve miles from the Lazy B buildings. It was after noon when Randy arrived. He tethered his horse to the hitch rail in front of Matt Palmer's Little Nugget saloon and went in search of the sheriff.

He failed to find the officer immediately but draped in a chair in the sheriff's office he came across one of the oddest looking human beings he had ever laid eyes on. At his entrance the apparition in the chair unfolded himself and stood up for inspection. He towered above Randy by at least three inches and was drawn out along narrow, skinny lines. In fact he seemed to run mostly to long, ungainly arms and legs. Above these and perched on top of a corded, scrawny neck was a long, narrow head, almost hideous in aspect with its slanted slate-color eyes that were flecked with yellow around the pin-point pupils. Between these, halving his face and lending width to a too generous mouth was a long, aquiline nose. But the full benefit of "Funny" Fallon's particular type of beauty could not be appreciated until he was seen with his hat off when his slanted pate, void of even a discouraged growth of hair, came into evidence. Then it was hard to tell where Funny Fallon's face left off and his foretop began.

The corners of Randy's mouth twitched. His lips parted, broke away over white teeth. With reckless ease his chuckle graduated into a long, rolling burst of laughter. He shook his head, tried vainly to iron the mirth wrinkles from his face.

"It don't seem possible," he ventured.

Oddly enough Funny Fallon's homely,

face cracked into a grin that split it from ear to ear.

"What don't seem possible?" he queried in a fog-horn voice that seemed to vibrate clear from the toes of his boots.

"That such a sufferin' example of humanity as you could go on livin'," laughed Randy. "How do yuh live with a face like that?"

"Aw, it's got its advantages," defended Funny. "If a man looks at me an' laughs I know damn well he's on the level but if he gits red around the gills an' don't laugh I figure he's yaller. Anyways, beauty's only skin deep. You should see my soul, feller. It's beautiful."

Randy choked. "I bet you got about as much soul as a cracked fiddle with all the strings missin'. But you're wrong about beauty bein' only skin deep. No power on earth could have made anything so cussed infernal outa skin alone. Nossir, Daniel Boone, that beauty of yours runs clean to the bone. Arf," he pulled a wry face. "If the inside's as hellish as the outside accordin', I hope nobody ever lays yuh open in front of me."

FUNNY shook his head and held up a hand, palm outward. "Yuh got me whipped for gab," he wailed. "What fetches yuh here besides yore yen for amusement? In case yuh don't know it you've blundered into the sheriff's office."

Randy nodded to the badge pinned on Funny's vest. "Somethin' tells me Dave Brawley musta made you a deputy in one of his weak moments," he put forth his hand. "My name's Reid. Yores, I hope is——"

"Funny Fallon," cut in the deputy, taking the proffered hand. "Reckon you must be the youngest Reid—the one they call Randy."

"Don't hold that against me," grinned Randy.

It was evident that these two would get along well together. Funny opened a drawer in the desk and produced a quart bottle half filled with whiskey. He pulled the cork with his teeth, wiped the mouth of the bottle on his sleeve and passed it to Randy.

"Reckon yo're dry after runnin' off at the mouth so much," he hinted. "This bottle belongs to Brawley, but I'll tell him it was yore idea. He figures you a top hand."

Randy measured down two fingers, tilted the bottle and let the fiery liquor gurgle down his throat.

"Right on the line," he observed, squinting at the new level when he took the bottle from his lips.

He handed it back to Funny who curled his long, knotty fingers around it, upended it and drained it to the last drop.

"Thank Gawd that's taken care of," he grunted.

HE SMACKED his lips, went to set the empty bottle down on the desk and then stared toward the open doorway. His mouth fell open. He tried desperately to snake the bottle off the desk and hide it. Randy turned to see a short, stern-featured man standing in the doorway. This was Dave Brawley, the small, grim-visaged little man who did a pretty good job of enforcing law and order throughout a large and extensive county that stretched from the west reaches of the San Joaquin Valley to the Mojave Desert on the east.

"Why, you danged hawg!" exploded Brawley, stepping into the room. "Yuh swilled that down like it was water."

"It ain't much better," Funny pulled a wry face. "Betcha that stuff wouldn't even sting an open sore."

"It's a good thing yuh dragged it out while Randy was here. Otherwise I'd tie a knot in that gander neck of yours," the sheriff turned to shake hands with Randy. "How are yuh, Randy? Figured it was about time you dropped in to say howdy. It's plumb evident you've already met one of my deputies. I keep him around for fly bait on the hot days. You ate yet?"

"No, but that'll keep," Randy threw one leg over the corner of the desk and eyed

the wiry little sheriff. "You know a duck named Phil Kesler?"

"Plenty," growled Brawley. "He's a no-good rustler that drifted into the country about a year ago an' bought out old Daddy Boice. Since then there's been hell poppin' up in your country. You oughta know about it. Rusty was tellin' me he suspected Kesler of stealin' some Double R hosses."

Randy nodded. "He was tellin' me the same but he didn't have any proof to offer."

"Seems like proof is blamed hard to get on Kesler," growled the sheriff. 'He's wily. We know for a fact that he was mixed up in rustlin' an' hoss stealin' 'fore he come here. Fact is he done three years in the Arizona penitentiary on a rustlin' charge. I've got one o' my deputies up in

Kelsey now keepin' a close watch on things. Young Pat Garrity. You know him."

"Shore. Ain't been up to Kelsey since I got home. Looks like Pat didn't watch Kesler close enough—he's dead!"

"Who's dead?"

"Kesler. Found him this mornin' swingin' from a cottonwood," and Randy went on to tell them about it. For some reason, known only to himself, he made no mention of Kesler's sister and the part she had played in the finding of her brother's body.

"Lynched, eh?" grunted Brawley when he had finished. "Wal, he had it comin', I reckon, but lynch law an' my law can't get along together in the same county. Reckon it calls for a ride up there. You bother the body any?"

"Cut it down is all."

"Find any sign?"

"Few tracks that petered out."

"No use ridin' clean up there then," put in Funny. "Let the coroner go gather up his dead an' Pat Garrity can do the investigatin'. That's what he's up there for, ain't it? Phil Kesler ain't nuthin' to me noways."

"Mebbe not, but yo're supposed to be somethin' to me besides a pain in the neck," retorted the sheriff. "I'll get the coroner an' we'll be ridin'. Get off yore lard an' go down an' get our hosses saddled."

"Aw, hell," complained Funny. "They's times when I wish I wasn't so blamed essential to this danged office. Gittin' a man out to pound leather in the heat o' the day —why don'tcha wait till night?"

HE LEFT grumbling to himself. Fifteen minutes later the three of them rode out of town. The coroner followed in a livery rig which he had to forsake for a position behind Dave Brawley's saddle shortly after they pulled onto the Block K for the rig couldn't be driven up into Cottonwood gulch.

"Only about a mile from here," explained Randy when the coroner had changed from the rig. "Old Roany here will pack him out if your crowbaits are skiddish."

"Why not bury him where he lays?" suggested Funny. "Save you an inquest, Doc, an' us a lotta trouble."

"Not a bad idea," admitted the coroner. "Only wish that it could be carried out. However, an inquest will have to be held and, unless I miss my guess, Dave will make an honest attempt to apprehend the men who took part in the lynching, even though it is a deed well done. Law is law."

"An' thirst is thirst," said Funny pulling a flask from the front of his shirt. "My throat's plumb parched."

Brawley eyed the bottle. "Where'd you get that?" he demanded.

"Bought it, o' course," returned Funny. "Where in hell yuh s'pose I got it? They don't give the stuff away, though they oughta pay a man to drink it. Stick out yore claws for the first guzzle."

As three hands were pushed out toward him he pulled the cork, tilted the flask and drained a good half of it.

"Just thought I'd git mine first," he explained. "The three of yuh can fight over what's left."

THE sheriff snatched the bottle from his grasp, took a pull at it and handed it back to the coroner. When it got to Randy he finished it and tossed it into a clump of brush.

"How much farther to the scene of activity?" Funny presently inquired.

"None. We've done arrived," said Randy pulling up beneath the cottonwood and dismounting.

The others stepped to the ground and followed him as he led the way to the clump of bushes where he had left the body. His halt was abrupt. He stared at the ground, then shot a quick, sweeping glance around.

"What's the matter?" questioned Brawley.

"You tell me," muttered Randy. "Kesler's gone!"

"Gone!" exclaimed the coroner.

"Looks that way. I dragged him over here an' left him in the shade. If you can see anything around here that looks like Kesler you got better eyes than me."

"Shore this was the spot?" queried the sheriff.

"Plumb certain."

"Are you sure he was dead?" asked the coroner.

"A man couldn't be alive an' look like Kesler did," said Randy. "He was plenty dead, Doc."

Funny said:

"Mebbe he got tired o' waitin' for us an' wandered off somewheres. Think we oughta take a looksee around?"

"Help yourself," invited Randy, and Funny disappeared in the brush.

Randy went back to the tree. When he had taken the rope from around Kesler's neck he had dropped it to the ground beneath the tree. It, too, was gone. So far as he could discern there was nothing here to show that Phil Kesler had been hanged to the cottonwood. Nothing to show that he had ever been here. Whoever had been tampering had done a good job of it. Brawley was standing close to the cottonwood poking his finger at the bark when Randy joined him.

"Looks like somebody emptied some lead into this tree plumb recent," observed Brawley. "Looky here."

Randy bent to look and nodded agreement. "Looks that way," he remarked, explaining no further.

HE DIDN'T see any sense in dragging the girl into it yet. Anyway, an explanation of the disappearance of the body was slowly forming in his mind. So far as he knew the girl was the only person besides himself who had seen Kesler. It must be she who had moved him for a reason that Randy could only guess at.

Funny Fallon came pushing out of the brush to join them.

"Yuh right damn shore yuh didn't dream yuh seen a corpse?" he inquired suspiciously of Randy.

"Might have at that," shrugged Randy, squatting on his heels to roll a cigarette.

Funny squatted beside him and produced his own makings. He gave his bony shoulders a hunch.

"Wal, what to do?"

"Only one thing to do," opined Brawley. "Find the corpse. I know Randy well enough to know he ain't lyin'. Maybe we better ride over to the Block K an' see what Kesler's sister knows about it. I wouldn't put it past her to move the body if she found it."

"Ain't likely a girl would mess around with a dead man even if he was her brother," discouraged Randy.

"Yuh don't know Neva Kesler," snorted Brawley. "She's got plenty sand in her craw. Kind of a cross between a wildcat an' a tomboy, they tell me. Goes around in men's clothes most o' the time an' don't take any gaff off anybody."

"She's got the same blood as her brother but they's many a young buck is willin' to overlook that," remarked Funny, setting fire to his cigarette. "Me, I'd like t' git a close look at her m'self. She don't never come down to Lupine."

"Come along then," ordered Brawley. "Seen all you want to here, ain't yuh, Doc?"

"I've seen nothing of what I was brought here to look at," replied the coroner. "You can ride to the Block K if you wish. I'm going back to Lupine," he smiled at Randy. "If you happen to recall where you left the corpse let me know but don't bring me out here again on another wild goose chase."

"Aw, we'll probably find Phil Kesler alive an' ornerier than ever at the Block K," grinned Funny. "I'm thinkin' this Randy party had a pipe dream."

"You say that a couple more times an' you'll have me believin' it," laughed Randy.

THEY took the coroner back to his rig, then swung northeast toward the Block K ranch-house. It was Randy's first visit to the place since Daddy Boice had released ownership. The ranch, though small and easily kept up, had deteriorated considerably under Phil Kesler's hand. They pulled a halt in the dirty, unkept yard and Brawley hailed the house.

Silence greeted his call and he tried again. When this brought no results he stepped to the ground and started toward the back door. Randy and Funny followed in his wake.

"Kinda over-steppin' ourselves bustin' in like this, ain't we?" Randy inquired as the sheriff took hold of the door knob.

"Mebbe," admitted the sheriff. "Howsomever, there's times when yuh got to bull your way ahead. Comin'?"

"Have at it," invited Funny. "You ain't no better'n us."

They entered through the kitchen and penetrated the other rooms without success.

"Nobody here, looks like," Brawley grunted his disappointment.

"Takes a smart man to arrive at that conclusion," hooted Funny. "Let's git outa here 'fore we dirty up the place. The

gal is mebbe crossed with a wildcat but the other half of her shore knows how to keep house. Hell, it even smells clean in here."

Funny wasn't exaggerating. The house was spick and span from one end to the other, though the furnishings were pitifully few and gave evidence of having seen a lot of hard wear.

"Might be the wise thing to hang around here a spell, but I don't know what good it would do," pronounced the sheriff when they were outside again.

"Yeah an' it's gittin' late an' we're a hell of a long ways from Lupine," said Funny.

"Ain't goin' to Lupine tonight," decided Brawley. "We'll ride up to Kelsey. It's a good nine miles closer. Anyway, I want to have a talk with Pat Garrity. Comin' along, Randy, or are you goin' to bend south to the Double R?"

"Might as well ride to Kelsey since I'm this close," said Randy.

"Think you'll find yore corpse in there?" jeered Funny.

"Might. Never can tell where a wandering corpse will end up," chuckled Randy.

Chapter III

BUCKLEY TALKS PLAIN

IT WAS dusk when Randy, the sheriff and Funny Fallon rode into the town of Kelsey. Their appearance created a stir along the already excited street. Men crowded close around the three and out of the mêlée the sheriff and his two companions learned that Neva Kesler had ridden into Kelsey to report the murder of her brother. Pat Garrity had ridden out to the Block K, had packed in the body and was now on his way to Lupine with it in a hired livery rig.

"Wal, I guess they really is a corpse," drawled Funny, grinning at Randy. "Not that I ever doubted yore word, feller, but yuh seemed to be havin' one hell of a time catchin' up with it. Ain't overtook it yet, by thunder."

A man came out of the town's one saloon, stepped across the plank walk to join the circle. He was a big man both in length and bulk. His jaw was square, his eyes level and his black hair was streaked with gray at the temples. "Buck" Buckley looked a cowman and was. The group broke in front of him, gave him an open course to the sheriff, where he paused, regarded the officer a second and chuckled.

"Wal, it looks like someone was testin' out a rope on Phil Kesler's neck an' killed him," he said. "I told yuh, Dave, if you didn't wrap bars around that maverick that somebody might get impatient with yore slow-movin' ways an' push Kesler's head into a noose."

"Shore that somebody wasn't you, Buck?" inquired Brawley.

"Might have been at that," came Buckley's careless reply. "I reckon I had more cause than anybody to string him up seein' it was me losin' most of the cows that's been disappearin' off this range." He laughed, met the sheriff's gaze squarely and asked. "How come yo're up here? Young Garrity didn't leave much more'n a half hour ago. Yuh meet him?"

"No." Brawley shook his head. "We didn't come by the road."

CLEVE TANSEY, young and handsome owner of the big Diamond T outfit lying to the east of the Block K crowded through the circle and into the foreground. Dark-skinned, brown-eyed, Cleve Tansey was thrown together along average lines except that he looked a little too well fed around the girth. However, this minor disfigurement in a country of lean-hipped men did little toward retarding the man's unholy conceit which had attained proportions that at times were decidedly overbearing. It was characteristic of him to push his way into the foreground of any gathering.

He spoke to the sheriff, Funny Fallon and Buckley, then turned bold, narrowed eyes on Randy.

"Chased yuh back to the home range, did they?" he jeered, a slur to his voice. "Bein' a top hand on your old man's spread is a heap different than wranglin' the cavvy on one of them Nevada outfits, ain't it?"

This was the first time these two had met since Randy's return but they weren't strangers by any means. A grudge had existed between them for years, perhaps due to the fact that Cleve, even as a boy, had always thought pretty well of himself. As youngsters they had undergone several encounters, but with maturity had left one another pretty much alone. In looking at him now Randy decided that with the death of Jim Tansey two years previously when Cleve had come into full control of the Diamond T his ego must have assumed greater proportions for Tansey was plainly bent on furthering their differences.

But, instead of rising to the bait, Randy offered him a slow, lazy grin and said:

"I see you ain't changed none, Cleve. Yuh bray just as loud as yuh ever did."

Somebody laughed and Tansey's cheeks took on a deeper hue. But, before he could voice further words the sheriff stepped into the breach.

"Since you went to all the trouble to

bull yore way up here what do you know about this killin', Cleve?" he questioned sharply.

TANSEY started, shifted his gaze from Randy's face to give the sheriff a hard, questioning glance.

"Me!" he ejaculated. "How would I know anything about it?"

"Don't look so damned startled," snorted the sheriff. "It's pretty well known around that you an' Kesler didn't hitch very well. Trouble over his sister, wasn't it? You was soft on her an' Kesler didn't want yuh hangin' around."

"We never had any trouble," denied Tansey. "Anyway, what I think of Neva Kesler is my own damn business and not to be bandied around the street by you or anybody else."

"Yo're right," Brawley admitted soberly. "You got more sense than I thought, Cleve. Now if you can get that swelled head of yores back through the crowd I think I can handle things out here myself."

Tansey had been neatly, bluntly and conclusively dismissed. But rather than retreat and face the gibes of the crowd he held his ground, his eyes smoldering as they raked Brawley's face. If the sheriff noticed he gave no heed as he gave his attention to Buckley who, after flashing a wide grin at Tansey, inquired:

"If yuh didn't meet Garrity, how come yuh knew about the lynchin', Dave?"

"Randy found the body an' came into Lupine to report it."

ALL eyes turned on Randy, Tansey's among them. It was Tansey who threw the first question at him.

"How come you were pokin' around on Block K range?"

"That's a habit of mine—just pokin' around," grinned Randy. "Yuh never know what you'll stumble onto."

"Probably aimin' to stumble onto the Kesler gal," laughed Buckley, giving him a dig in the ribs with an elbow. "Wal, yuh ain't got a corner on that disease, kid. Reckon every young buck in the country has had ideas along that line but o' course—" he paused, threw a leering glance at Tansey and finished, "—since Cleve took to ridin' herd on the place they ain't stood a chance. Mebbe you can give him a run for his money."

"If it's money that talks I ain't got a chance," grinned Randy. "They tell me that Cleve is enjoyin' full swing over the Diamond T now."

"An' doin' right well by hisself, it looks like," said Buckley. "Kesler took a special likin' for my brand, it looked like. Leastways it seems he kinda concentrated on my cows."

"Guess the rest of us have lost as many as you," retorted Tansey. "We just ain't squawked as loud is all."

"Wal, what squawkin' I done was to the sheriff," declared Buckley. "That's the hell of it with havin' the country overrun with law. Ten, fifteen years ago we wouldn't have done no yellin'. We'd have strung up Kesler pronto an' forgot about it."

"Wal, he's strung up now, but he ain't forgot about by a jugful," said Brawley. "Lynchin' is looked at as murder these days, Buck."

"Shows what civilization does to a country," growled Buckley. He eyed Randy. "Find any sign around the body?"

"There's always sign if you can read it," drawled Randy.

"You've probably got ideas then?" hinted Buckley.

"If I have I ain't stringin' them out on the line right now," declared Randy. "It ain't healthy to talk out of turn, Buck."

"Yo're right. It ain't. Way I see it most anybody could have strung up Kesler with just cause. Far as I'm concerned he's gone an' forgot about. If you've got any other notions about it, Sheriff, you know where to find me."

HE TURNED, sifted through the crowd and strode up the street. Dave Brawley stared after him thoughtfully.

"Damn fool," growled Tansey. "Old Buck would tell you straight out that he killed Kesler an' then dare yuh to prove it on him. He's out-spoken that way. Don't seem to give a hoot what he says. It would be a crime to stick an old hellion like Buck behind bars for killin' a skunk like Kesler."

"Who said anything about stickin' him behind bars!" flashed Brawley, frowning at Tansey.

Tansey shrugged. "You're the sheriff. I'm damn glad it ain't my job."

He turned with that, pushed through the ring of spectators and made his way into the saloon.

"Let's eat," growled the sheriff and with Funny and Randy following in his wake,

led the way across the street to the restaurant.

"Wal," drawled Funny as they pulled out chairs and seated themselves at one of the tables. "Bein' plain spoken covers up a multitude o' sins sometimes. Mebbe old Buck an' his boys did string up Kesler."

"I'm going to leave you up here a couple days to try and find that out," said the sheriff. "For once try keepin' that big mouth of yores shut an' yore eyes an' ears open. Yuh might learn somethin'."

"Where you goin'?" inquired Funny.

"I'm ridin' to Lupine as soon as we eat. I want to get a look at that corpse."

"Hell, a man can't git drunk in two days," grumbled Funny. "Leastways I can't. Takes longer'n that for it to filter down through my carcass to where she's got a back-lash."

"Don't know as it would make a heap of difference," shrugged Brawley. "You ain't got a lick o' sense when yo're sober anyway."

"That ain't my fault," defended Funny. "I was doin' all right till you tried to wean me away from the bottle. Nothin' like a quart o' good rye to brighten up yore ideas an' purge yore soul."

"Soul, hell," snorted Brawley. "All that ever comes outa you is song an' dang sour yeowlin' at that. Once you git that voice of yores oiled up she sounds like a cross between a piccolo an' a bellerin' steer."

"You just don't appreciate good windpipe control is all," grinned Funny.

"If yo're plumb shore it's yore windpipe responsible for all them rusty groans, you'd do the community at large a dang big favor by tyin' a knot in the blamed thing."

"Why not just cut his throat," suggested Randy. "It'd be a sight easier."

Their food arrived and they fell to eating. Later, when the sheriff had ridden out of town, Randy and Funny stabled their horses, procured a room at the hotel and made their way back to the saloon. Buckley was standing at the head end of the bar as they stepped in through the swinging doors. He motioned for them to join him.

A FEW minutes later Cleve Tansey and another man entered the saloon. The man with Tansey was a stranger to Randy, but a moment later he was being introduced as Clint Messner, Tansey's foreman of six months' standing. In looking him over Randy saw a pair of narrow, greenish eyes pressed deep in a cavernous face that ran mostly to leathery skin stretched tight over prominent bones. Texan, he guessed and a moment later when his eyes strayed to the fellow's low-slung gun he decided that Messner was also a gunman.

"Sheriff go back to Lupine?" queried Tansey.

Funny nodded. "He didn't figure he could do any good around here."

"What did he leave you here for?"

Funny tilted his hat and scratched his head. "I been wonderin' that m'self."

"Wonder what Kesler's sister will do now that he ain't here to look after the ranch?" said Randy.

"Been wonderin' that myself," said Buckley. "Guess she can run it alone as well as it has been run. It's plumb gone to hell in the past year. Kesler wouldn't hire nobody an' he was too blamed lazy to do anything hisself exceptin' steal hosses an' cows. Might buy her out if she don't try to hold me up on the price. She could take the money an' go somewhere else an' get a new start for herself. Some folks hereabouts kinda look down on her because she happens to be Kesler's sister.

"Nothin' to hold her here now with her brother gone," pointed out Buckley.

"Her brother didn't hold her here," stated Tansey. "She come here an' bought the ranch with her own money. He didn't own it. She could have sold out and left any time she wanted to."

"Oh, I reckon she'd sell for a price," said Buckley. "Why don't you buy her out, Cleve? You could use the outfit a heap better'n me.

"I've got no money to buy the Block K or any other outfit," said Tansey.

"Why don'tcha marry her then?" grinned Buckley. "With her brother outa the way you'll maybe stand a better chance with her. He kinda kept yuh herded away from her, didn't he?"

TANSEY colored. "Nobody keeps me herded away from something I want," he boasted.

"That's takin' in a lotta territory," drawled Funny. "They's such a thing as gittin' too ambitious."

Tansey turned on him. "What do you mean by that?"

"Mebbe Phil Kesler got in yore way an' you took the shore way of gittin' him out of it," grinned Funny.

Tansey's eyes shot sparks. "If you figure you've got anything on me, spread your cards, Fallon!" he snapped. "Otherwise keep your notions to yourself. When I kill a man it'll be with a gun, not a rope, and I'll do it here in town where he has an even break," he shot a side glance at Buckley.

Buckley grinned under the significant glance. "I always did say that shootin' is too good for a rustler. What Kesler got is just a warning to any more who might be hangin' around this country."

Clint Messner had worked his way around until he now stood at Randy's left elbow. He now offered comment for the first time.

"Cleve tells me it was you who found the body," he said to Randy. "Whoever done it must have left some sign."

Randy eyed him. "If there was any sign left it's still there," he said. "I didn't disturb it none. Why don't all you folks who seem to be so dang interested go out an' have a look for yoreselves?"

MESSNER'S eyes narrowed still more. "That might not be a bad idea," he drawled.

"You right damn sure you wasn't there when it happened, Randy?" hinted Tansey, a nasty slur to his voice. "Your outfit was losin' stuff. Your brother Rusty sure wasn't bashful about sayin' what he'd do to the rustlers if he stumbled onto them."

"He'd be a dang fool to go tellin' the sheriff about it if he was in on it," said Buckley.

"I dunno," sneered Tansey. "He maybe figured that story about findin' the body was a cast-iron alibi. We ain't heard yet, why he was pokin' around on Block K range."

"An' yuh never will hear it if yuh wait for me to tell yuh," stated Randy, moving away from the bar and stepping up close to confront Tansey. Their eyes clashed. "You tried to start somethin' out in the street a while back, Cleve," he went on. "It looks a heap like you aim to do some crowdin' in here."

Tansey's lips curled in a sneer. "Tryin'

to work yourself out of a tight by goin' on the prod, are yuh," he goaded. "I ain't lookin' for trouble but if the shoe fits yuh it ain't my fault. There's an old sayin' that the truth hurts."

Randy's lips cracked into a slow grin as Tansey took a backward step.

"You always was a yellow dog, Cleve," he accused. "I've whipped you a dozen times an' I can do it again—I will do it if yuh don't button that trap of yours. And that's just our old grudge talkin'. As far as Phil Kesler goes—I ain't worryin' none about what folks think about that. Yuh see I know who strung up Kesler."

IT WAS a bald-faced lie but it had its effect upon the four men grouped around him. The expressions on all their faces changed and for a moment Randy took advantage of the opportunity to study them. Funny Fallon was the first to speak.

"Wal, for Gawd's sake," he exploded. "If yuh know who done it why ain't yuh said something about it before this?"

"I ain't the law," shrugged Randy. "The sheriff wouldn't make any arrests on my say-so, but before I'm done I'll have a rope around the killer's neck, you can bet your last sack of Bull on that."

"More talk with no cards to back it," sneered Tansey. "Anyway, what was Phil

Kesler to you? Why you gettin' in a lather over him being strung up?"

"I ain't in no lather, but somebody's goin' to be," promised Randy. "Kesler wasn't nothin' to me except that I don't believe in lynch-law."

"Maybe yuh believe in rustlin'?" spoke up Buckley.

"About as much as you do, Buck," Randy grinned across at him. "But since we got law in this country we oughta live up to it."

"Leastways yuh oughta respect it," said Funny. "I'm as dry as a desert wind. Have I gotta buy all the likker?"

Tansey and Messner pulled away from the group and Funny, Randy and Buckley turned back to the bar. Presently Buckley left and after lingering a while to watch a couple games get under way Randy and Funny made their way down to the hotel. Once in the confines of their room Funny was inclined to talk.

"All right, kid, spill it," he ordered when the door was closed and bolted.

"Spill what?" queried Randy.

"What yuh know about Kesler gittin' strung up."

"Shucks, I told you an' the sheriff a long time ago all I know about that," chuckled Randy.

"Then why was you yellin' over in the saloon that yuh knowed who done it?"

"Bluff," said Randy. "Wanted to see how them hairpins was gonna take it. I don't know any more about that killin' than you do, Funny."

THE deputy squinted at him. "I wish I knowed you better," he grumbled. "Mebbe then I could tell when you was lyin'. Dang fool business makin' a speech like that if yuh don't know nothin'."

"Maybe so. But, if my hunch is right, somebody's doin' some heavy thinkin' about now. Yuh see I figure it was one of them three had a big fist in stringin' up Kesler—maybe all of them are mixed up in it, I dunno."

"Why them? They's a lotta other folks in this country."

"Sure, but not folks who would go outa their way to lynch a man. Old Buck ain't makin' any bones about how he felt about Kesler an' we know blamed well that Cleve Tansey had trouble with him. That other ranny—Tansey's foreman—I ain't quite got him figured out yet. What do you know about him?"

"Nuthin' much. He blowed in here

about a year ago lookin' for a job. Tansey put him on. He turned out to be a top hand so Cleve boosted him to the ramrod about six months ago."

"Hes' a hard lookin' whippoorwill."

"Tough as whang leather, I reckon, but he tends pretty much to his own dang business an' he knows cows."

"I wonder how much Cleve knows about him?"

"Whatcha mean?"

"Well, in ramblin' around I've run across one or two of the wild bunch an' if Messner ain't built along the same lines then I sure miss my guess. He's got all the earmarks. Was him an' Kesler friendly?"

"I don't reckon they was. It was Messner who sprung it about Kesler bein' an ex-convict from Arizona."

"How did he know about it?"

"Claims he was down there at the time Kesler was sent up."

"Him and Kesler ever have any trouble here?"

"Nope, but they shore stepped wide of each other. Whatcha tryin' to do—hitch Messner up to that killin'?"

"Maybe," Randy shrugged. "That duck's got somethin' on his mind. Could tell by the way he acted."

"Yeah, wal they ain't nothin' on my mind except sleep. Blow out that lamp 'fore I heave a boot at it."

Chapter IV

BULLETS

THE following morning after breakfast Randy and Funny made their way down to the stable.

"We'll take us a ride out to Cottonwood gulch," said Funny. "Mebbe they's some sign you overlooked. Might not be a bad idea if we stopped by the Block K an' had a talk with that Kesler gal. She's mebbe got a hunch who killed her brother."

Randy shook his head. "Count me out of that part of it."

The deputy bent him a questioning glance. "Whatsa matter—you girl-shy?"

"Nope."

"Then what the hell——"

Randy eyed him a moment, then told about his encounter with the girl.

"Why didn'tcha spill this before?" questioned Funny.

"Didn't see any sense in it. It's got nothing to do with who killed Kesler."

"Might have. Reckon you better come along with me."

Randy shrugged and put up no further protest. This time life was astir at the ranch-house. Smoke lifted lazily from the kitchen chimney and as they rode into the yard Cleve Tansey came out of the house and climbed his horse which had been tied to the porch rail. His cheeks were flushed, his eyes smoldering as he rode up to where they sat their horses.

"What are you doing out here?" he snapped. The question was fired at both of them but his eyes were on Randy.

"Might ask the same of you," answered Funny.

"No harm in askin'," said Tansey. "If you came out to question Neva, she don't know anything."

"No—" Funny gave him a hard look. "I ain't in the habit of gittin' my information second-hand, Cleve. I'll let her tell it to me her own self."

"She don't want to be bothered," snapped Tansey. "It's hard enough on her losin' her brother without havin' a couple dumbwits like you firing a flock of questions at her."

"When you git to be sheriff I'll take yore orders, Cleveland, my boy," jibed Funny. "In the meantime—which I reckon will be a damn long time—I'll foller my own hunches. Glad we seen you again an' we're plumb sorry yo're leavin'."

"Maybe I ain't leavin'," growled Tansey.

"You wouldn't git tough with a little feller about my size an' build, would yuh?" drawled Funny, in a voice that had taken on an edge. "Folks that's tangled with me claim I got more dang arms an' legs than a octopus. Now, I'd hate t' mess anybody up this early in the mornin' but——"

"Aw, go to hell," snarled Tansey. Whirling his horse he sank home the spurs.

FUNNY chuckled and slipped to the ground. Randy followed suit. When they again looked toward the house, both jerked stiff. Neva Kesler was now framed in the doorway. She had forsaken her Levis and denim shirt for a frilly dress that lent a feminine appeal that had been lacking in the rough man's attire. Randy's eyes widened. It seemed he was seeing her for the first time. The vision all but floored him, yet instead of staring at her he shifted his gaze, lifted his hat and spoke.

"Mornin'."

He tried to act unconcerned but it was a rather stiff gesture for his body seemed to be tied in a knot and he felt unnaturally clumsy.

"Good mornnig," there was little warmth in her words and her eyes were questioning as she raked them with a glance.

Randy shifted nervously, forced his gaze to meet her own and experienced a sensation which up until now had been foreign to him. It seemed that all the blood in his body took a sudden notion to rush to his head. He felt choked, the roots of his hair tingled and a stiffness crept in around his lips. For the first time in his life Randy Reid was befuddled, uncomfortably self-conscious and absolutely tongue-tied.

Funny, after the first jolt, fared better. He got command of his voice and used it.

"I'm Deputy Sheriff Fallon, ma'am," he explained. "This other ranny is Randy Reid. We don't aim to bother yuh long, but we'd kinda like to ask you a few questions."

She nodded agreement. "Won't you come inside?"

Funny flushed and shook his head. "Thank yuh, ma'am, but I talk a heap better when I'm out in the open."

She smiled at that and stepped out onto the porch. "Won't you at least come up to the porch?" she invited. "It will save yelling at each other."

THE two exchanged glances and moved up closer. As they paused near the steps she asked:

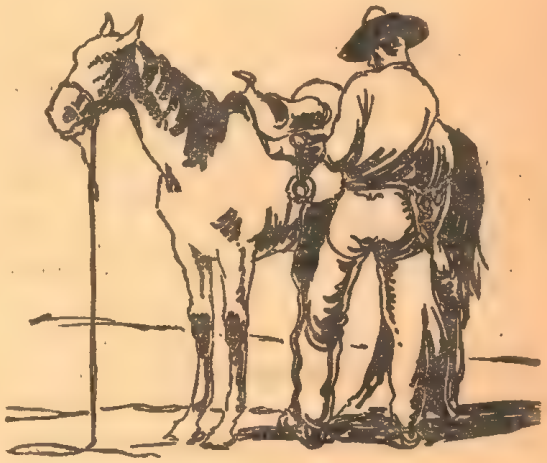
"What is it you want to ask me?"

A vacant expression came over Funny's face. He shot an appealing glance at Randy, received no promise of assistance from that source and blurted:

"Wal, shucks, I dunno."

She seemed to understand for she flashed another smile and nodded.

"Perhaps it will be better if I just tell you what I know about my brother. It won't take long for I know very little



except that he left the ranch right after breakfast as usual riding west toward the Lazy B. Two or three hours later his horse came home with an empty saddle. I thought at first the horse had strayed off and left him afoot someplace. But then, I noticed that the reins were tied up and looped over the saddle horn and I became worried. Phil had ridden west and the horse had come from that direction so that's the way I rode."

She paused for a moment, looked straight into Randy's face and added: "That's all except that I found Phil down in Cottonwood Gulch."

"Un-hunh," Funny nodded. "Randy done told me about what happened after that. You was excited, I reckon, but you

was shore enough tossin' lead at the wrong hombre, Miss. Randy here didn't have nothin' t' do with what happened to yore brother. Neither did any of the rest of the Double R outfit."

Color stole into her cheeks. "I've concluded that since yesterday," she looked straight into Randy's eyes. "I'm sorry about what happened. I might have killed you."

"Thassal right," muttered Randy in a throaty voice that he scarcely recognized as being his own. "You come awful close to gettin' your head caved in. What I can't sabe is why you stuck around after your gun was empty."

"I suppose I knew that you would come back after your horse and I wanted to get a better look at you."

"Yuh didn't see anybody else besides Randy, didja ma'am?" Funny probed further.

"He was the only one."

"Might I ask if you got any ideas about who done it?"

"None of my own," she said. "Cleve Tansey thinks it might have been Mr. Buckley and the Lazy B crew."

"Talkin' it up, is he," said Randy. "Sure he didn't try to tell yuh it was me?"

"Why—yes, he mentioned it."

"Mention hell—beggin' yore pardon, ma'am, I mean he more'n likely come right out an' told yuh shore that it was Randy," declared Funny. "Cleve's like that. He's got a plumb vicious tongue that somebody is gonna yank plumb outa his head someday. If he thinks somebody is gonna cut in on his territory—" he choked there as he got a hard glance from Randy, floundered a minute and finished lamely, "aw, shucks, forget it."

"We best be goin'," proposed Randy, uncomfortable lest the deputy blurt something else.

"Might as well, I reckon," agreed Funny. To the girl he said: "Inquest will probably be held tomorrow. Yuh better ride down to Lupine in the mornin'."

"I'm going in this afternoon and will stay over," she promised.

THEY thanked her, mounted and rode off toward Cottonwood Gulch. Her eyes were troubled as she watched them out of sight and there was an uncertainty about her manner as she went back into the house.

"No pay dirt there," grunted Funny once they were out of hearing distance of the house. "She don't know any more'n we do—mebbe not as much."

"Reckon not," agreed Randy, but his eyes were brooding.

"Plumb pretty little filly," said Funny. "'Tain't often I git dissatisfied with my looks, but while we was talkin' to her I shore made me a wish that I wasn't so Gawd-awful homely. Now a feller like you—but shucks, yo're too doggone bashful t' ever git anywheres with a gal like that. Take Cleve Tansey. You can bet he's got his tongue wobblin' six ways tryin' t' shine up to her. He's hell-bent on marryin' the gal. Why else you suppose he was over there this mornin'?"

"Don't know an' don't give a damn," growled Randy.

"Which means yuh give plenty damn," said Funny sagely. "I seen right off she had yuh floored. If you let a scissor-bill like Tansey walk off with the prize yo're crazy."

They dropped into Cottonwood Gulch and started down. At the gallows tree they pulled a halt and looked the ground over carefully. Finally when nothing of interest showed up under their scrutiny they mounted again and started down gulch toward the crossing where Randy had lost the tracks that he had followed away from the scene of the crime.

They had covered possibly half the distance when the authoritative bark of a high-powered rifle brought them up short. No lead had come close but after one quick glance around they wheeled their horses toward the east slope which afforded them better cover. Half way up the slope they

pulled a halt in the lee of a clump of dense brush and slid to the ground. Their eyes met.

"See where it come from?" questioned Funny.

Randy shook his head. "I didn't see anything, but it sounded like it came from this slope a little farther down. Probably somebody shootin' at a coyote or somethin'."

"Yeah, wal, I ain't hankerin' to be mistook for no coyote," grunted Funny. "I'm aimin' to spot that feller 'fore I go pokin' my nose out in the open again."

CROUCHING low he rounded the bush, parted the foliage and peered down the gulch. Randy moved uphill from the bush and bent a searching glance along the upper reaches of the ridge. He saw a movement, caught a fleeting glimpse of a horseman just bending over the crest of the ridge.

"There he goes," he hissed at Funny and started up the slope.

A second later something whistled past his ear, nipped the limb off a bush up ahead of him and kicked up a little cloud of dust as it buried itself in the ground. The distant bark of a rifle came floating across the gulch to their ears.

"Hunt cover, you fool!" yelled Funny. "They got us between a cross-fire."

Randy changed his mind about racing up the slope and made a dive for the nearest cover, but not before more bullets had whistled close and the roll of a fast-barking rifle was echoing up and down the gulch.

Then Funny's carbine was in action, belching smoke, sending lead screaming across the gulch. Randy wormed his way down to join the deputy, but instead of joining him in sending a spray of lead across the gulch, he kept his eyes trained up-slope where he had seen the horseman disappear.

His gun empty, Funny squatted down, his eyes swept to Randy's face.

"Son-of-a horned-toad, I'll betcha I stirred him up plenty."

"Who?" inquired Randy.

"How the hell should I know? Wasn't his name on his callin' card?"

"Plumb forgot to look," grinned Randy. "But I got a good look at the jasper that went over this hill."

"Think you'll know him again, do yuh?"

"Hell, I know him now."

"Who?"

"Clint Messner—Tansey's ramrod."

"Messner!" Funny showed his surprise. "Yuh shore?"

"Plumb certain."

"Humph," grunted Funny. "Mebbe that gent across the canyon then is Tansey."

"Didn't yuh see him?"

"No. Just seen the smoke when he cut loose atcha. But I shore raked his nest with lead. Reckon I either got him or he's lightin' a shuck outa there. Yuh notice they ain't no more lead comin' across."

"I'm gettin' outa here," declared Randy.

"Where yuh goin'?"

"Up-slope. I'm gonna get up where I can see somethin'."

"Ain't a bad idea if we can git away with it. This spot is too much like a three-cornered slice of hell."

LEAVING their horses they slowly worked their way up the slope. Silence reigned over the gulch and they finally reached the top without a shot having been fired. There they peered around in all directions. To the east and south of them they saw nothing. To the west, far across on the high mesa where lay the Lazy B buildings they saw a moving, dark spot which upon studied inspection proved to be a horseman riding fast toward the ranch buildings.

"Must be the gent who was on the other slope or one of them anyways," guessed Funny. "I'm wonderin' what in hell this is all about?"

"We won't find out squatting here," said Randy. "Let's go back down to the horses and ride."

"Where?"

"To the Lazy B."

Funny nodded agreement. "But first I'm takin' me a look at the spot where that trigger-quick gent was roostin'."

The gulch seemed to be clear of hostilities, but nevertheless, they kept as much as possible to cover as they crossed the gulch and climbed the opposite slope. Fi-

nally Funny pulled rein, dropped to the ground and started forward on foot.

"That nest of rocks up above here," he pointed a finger. "He was squattin' behind that bush yuh see there."

Randy followed him up the slope. They worked cautiously around the bush with drawn guns and saw—nothing.

"Sloped, I reckon," grunted Funny.

"If he was ever here," said Randy. "I don't see no empty shells layin' around."

"Probably took 'em with him," said Funny.

"Maybe."

Randy bore to the south along the rocks for a distance of ten feet and suddenly halted. He stooped down and came up again with five brass shells in his hand. Funny stared at them, pushed back his hat to scratch his head and divided a puzzled glance between the bush and the spot where Randy stood.

"How the hell yuh figure I misjudged him that far?" he puzzled.

Randy shrugged. "Dunno unless it was the slant you was gittin' on things. Breeze is goin' that way. Smoke drifted an' fooled yuh maybe. Anyways, whoever was squattin' here was usin' a .44-.40."

"Common enough gun hereabouts," grunted Funny. "Let's git on to the Lazy B."

BUCKLEY came stalking out of the ranch-house as they pulled up in the yard. His face was scratched and bruised and he appeared to be in a violent mood.

"Wal, for Gawd's sake!" exclaimed Funny. "What you been tanglin' with—a wild-cat?"

Buckley swore, he cursed and came down off the porch leveling a forefinger at the deputy.

"Why in hell wasn't you around?" he demanded. "That's the way with you law-hounds, yo're never around when yuh might be needed. I reckon you musta come by that way, but as usual, too late."

"I'm still wonderin' what happened to yore face," reminded Funny.

"I took a nose dive into a pile of rocks," growled Buckley.

"Nice gentle pastime," commented Funny. "Kinda hard on the face though, ain't it?"

"Damn sight harder on the disposition when yuh figure it was a slug of lead that gave me the notion."

"Yuh don't say?" encouraged Funny. "This country is shore revertin' to the primitive what with lead bein' throwed around free an' easy an' you takin' to the rocks."

"Six inches closer an' that slug would have played hell with my inwards," declared Buckley. "Way it was it busted the skin on my ribs."

"Where did all this happen?" asked Randy.

"Over in Cottonwood Gulch. I was aimin' to ride over an' give that Kesler gal a bid on her outfit when some dirty son cut loose at me. When that slug hit I didn't wait to pick me a spot. I just jerked loose my carbine an' took a dive. It so happened that I lit in a nest of rocks."

"Only the one shot fired?" queried Randy.

"They was a whole flock o' them fired," asserted Buckley. "My hoss bolted clean

over the hill an' figurin' I was stranded anyways I took me a look around an' finally seen a polecat goin' up the opposite slope. I cut loose at him—would have got him, I reckon but he had a pardner lower down who started throwin' bullets all around me. Knowed I didn't have much chance against the two of them so I snaked my way over the hill, caught up my hoss an' come foggin' it to the ranch, figurin' if any of the boys was here I'd git 'em an' go back an' fight it out with them bushwhackin' shotes."

"Yuh don't have to go back," grinned Randy. "They're right here lookin' at yuh." He went on to tell the cowman what had happened, but strangely enough he made no mention that the dry gulcher was Clint Messner.

FUNNY apparently took his cue from Randy and also made no mention of Messner's name.

"So it was you sprinklin' all that lead around me," growled Buckley, glaring at Funny. "Why, you damned, blind idiot, yuh mighta killed me."

"Forgettin', ain't yuh, that you was doin' your best to do just that to me?" said Randy.

Buckley looked at him a minute and finally laughed. "There's one for yuh to tie," he said. "While the three of us toss lead at each other the dry gulchin' jasper gits plumb away."

They talked for a while longer and then Funny and Randy took their departure.

"Wal, can you imagine that?" drawled Funny when they had left the ranch behind. "Why do yuh figure Clint Messner was tryin' to put Buckley away?"

"Ain't even got an idea," said Randy. "Anyway, I figured it best that we didn't tell Buckley who it was shot at him. We got nothin' on Messner an' tellin' Buckley it was him would just start the old man on his trail an' probably stir up a sweet little range war. For the time bein' I reckon we best not say anything to anybody about Messner, not even the sheriff. But I aim to get better acquainted with that gent."

Chapter V

INQUEST AND FUNERAL

THE following day the inquest was held down in Lupine. It was merely routine for nothing of importance came out in the testimony that might cast suspicion on the parties involved in the lynching of Phil Kesler. When Randy testified he said nothing of his encounter with Neva Kesler the day that he found the body and following his lead the girl did the same.

There were no bullet wounds in the body but the coroner had discovered a bruise on the back of the head leading to the conclusion that Kesler had first been struck a blow on the head and then hanged, by parties unknown to the jury.

With the body released by the coroner, Kesler's funeral was held that afternoon. Cleve Tansey was open with his friendship for the girl. He sat with her at the inquest, stood at her side at the burial and later insisted upon accompanying her home. But she informed him that she would probably stay the night in town and ride out to the ranch in the morning. Tansey also decided that he would spend the night in town.

"There's no use trying to put me off, Neva," he told her. "You can't run the Block K alone and you've been told before this what I think of you. I want you. Now with your brother gone you need someone to look after you."

"I can take care of myself," she said. "Won't you please not mention this again, Cleve."

"You love me, don't you?" he asked rather gruffly.

"No," she bit the word off short. "I like you all right as a friend but I don't care for you and never could."

He laughed arrogantly. "I reckon you'd learn to do that all right after we were married. I've got a lot to offer you and

it isn't all counted in land and cows, either," his eyes burned into her face, hinting at the trend of his talk.

She had seen that expression there before. Her brother had also seen it. It was probably why he had ordered Tansey to stay away from his sister.

"I'll never marry you no matter what you have to offer," she asserted. "Let this be the last time the question comes up."

"It will be," he promised her. "But don't forget that I take what I want."

She whirled on her heel and left him standing there fuming inside. Then he bent his steps toward the Little Nugget in search of a liquid stimulant for his pricked vanity.

DOWN in the sheriff's office Randy, Funny and the sheriff were talking. The sheriff was telling what he knew about Phil Kesler.

"Guess he was always a no-good cuss," he was saying. "When I wrote down there askin' about him that Arizona sheriff give me all the details on the family. The girl is older by a year. She's

twenty-four or five now. Their folks died when she was eighteen an' she's been tryin' to make somethin' outa Phil ever since. She got hold of what money their folks left an' she taught school all the time Phil was in the pen. When he got out she fetched him up here where they wasn't known an' bought the Block K. Guess she figured if she had him up here amongst strangers that he'd settle down an' make somethin' outa himself."

"He did," grunted Funny. "He made a weight for stretchin' a good hemp rope."

"He mighta done better if Clint Messner hadn't showed up here an' recognized him," said Brawley. "After Messner spilt who he was the kid never had a chance. Folks shied off from him an' got to watchin' him close an' they soon learned he needed watchin' because the cows started disappearin'."

"Wasn't any rustlin' before he come here, eh?" questioned Randy.

"None was noticed."

"How long after he got here before it started?"

"I dunno. Wasn't till about four, five months ago that folks started yellin' about it. But he was one slick hombre. I been watchin' him an' the Block K for months an' never discovered how he was gettin' the stuff outa the country."

"Maybe you've been watchin' the wrong place," said Randy.

"How yuh mean—that Kesler wasn't doin' the rustlin'?"

"Might not have been."

THE sheriff shook his head. "Reckon it was him all right. He never done nothin' around the ranch, ain't sold a beef since he come here an' yet he always seemed to have money. That don't make sense."

"Maybe the girl had money left over," said Randy.

"An' maybe she didn't," said Brawley. "She still owes ten thousand on it, which comes due in a couple more years."

"Well, look where the Block K is located," argued Randy. "Got ranches on three sides of it an' the town of Kelsey on the north. He'd have a heck of a time gettin' stolen stuff off the Block K if he held 'em there which is doubtful."

"Yeah, it's plumb doubtful. I've combed that ranch from rump to forelock huntin' stolen stuff. Reckon he rustled 'em an' got 'em clean outa the country the same night. Only way I can see he worked it."

"That would call for some drivin'," pointed out Randy. "Cows ain't race horses, Sheriff. Way I see it there's only one direction where rustled stuff could be

taken out of the country and that's east across the Peon Mountains."

"Yeah, an' Cleve Tansey's outfit had him blocked in that direction. Likewise the north sweep of yore dad's Double R."

"I'm pretty blamed sure no rustled stuff ever crossed the Double R," said Randy. "But how about the Diamond T. You ever look over there for a trail or anything?"

"Why waste time lookin' around the Diamond T. Cleve wasn't doin' the rustlin'. Anyways, his men are ridin' that range every day."

"All new hands, ain't they?"

"Wal, kinda. Messner an' a couple others have been with him most a year."

"How come?" asked Randy.

"How come what?"

"His old crew left him."

"Didn't like the way he run things after his old man died. Cleve is all right in some ways but he's big headed an' hard to work for. Yuh see when old Jim Tansey was runnin' things the boys didn't take no gaff off Cleve. Then when Cleve got to be boss he got to ridin' them an' they up an' quit all in one bunch."

FUNNY FALLON yawned widely, took his feet down from the top of the desk, pulled open a drawer and produced a quart bottle of whiskey.

"Let's forgit the rustlin' an' have a drink," he proposed. "None of us has lost any cows but we have missed out on a couple drinks."

The sheriff squinted at the bottle. "Hey," he protested. "That happens to be my whiskey."

"I wouldn't brag about it," grunted Funny pulling the cork and passing the mouth of the bottle under his nose. "I've smelt better aromy comin' out of a slop barrel. But to save argument you can have the first snort," he handed the bottle to the sheriff.

Randy drank with them, then left the office and made his way up the street. As he drew even with the hotel he saw Neva Kesler sitting in the shade of the long veranda. He paused, lifted his hat. She spoke, flashed him a smile. That smile did things to him. Before he realized it his feet were carrying him toward the porch. But once close to her he could think of nothing to say. She motioned to a chair, invited him to sit down. Randy sat, glad of the opportunity to get where he was less conspicuous. With the weight off his feet and something solid beneath him he felt more at ease.

"You waitin' till it cools off before ridin' back to the Block K?" he asked her, a sudden bold notion taking shape in his mind.

"I had thought of staying the night in town," she said.

"Oh," Randy's face fell.

Noting the change of expression she regarded him a moment. Then her eyes twinkled and she asked:

"Are you staying in?"

He shook his head. "I reckon not. That's why I figured if you was goin' out yuh maybe wouldn't mind if I rode along with yuh. Nice ridin' in the evenin'. If yuh wait till mornin' yuh gotta face the sun most o' the way."

"I hadn't thought of that," she seemed to reconsider. "Perhaps I shall ride out tonight after all."

Randy looked startled but was quick to pick her up. "Yuh mean yuh don't care if I trail along with yuh?"

"If you want to."

They smiled at one another. "Want to!" exclaimed Randy. "When do we start?"

"Right now if you wish."

"We're practically on our way, Miss Kesler," he erupted from the chair.

"My horse is down at the stable."

"I'll get him for yuh," and Randy was off the porch trotting toward the stable.

HE WAS inside the stable before it dawned on him that he had forgotten to ask her what kind of horse she rode. He barged into the tiny office in the front

of the stable looking for the hostler, failed to find the man and started back through the stable, peeking in at the stalls.

"Probably packin' a Block K brand," he muttered. "Either that or a Bar 3, Daddy Boice's old brand. Anyways, I'll look around for both. Dang that hostler, wonder where he got to?"

He moved back along the runway, reached the back of the barn without having seen a Block K or Bar 3 horse and paused there a second to scratch the side of his jaw reflectively. When this failed to produce the horse in question he retraced his steps, making a more thorough search.

"Funny," he muttered upon reaching the front of the barn and still having turned up no Block K or Bar 3 horse.

His gaze roved the runway, fell on the roll doors at the rear. They were closed, but through the cracks he saw something moving in the corral in the rear of the barn. A grin spread over his face and he nodded sagely. The hostler must have turned Neva Kesler's horse out into the corral to water and roll.

He turned his steps toward the rear again, reached the door and was on the verge of pushing them open when the sound of low-pitched voices came to his ears.

"You damn fool," someone close to the building was saying. "Why in hell did you want to show yoreself here in town?"

"Heard Phil had got knocked off an' come in for the funeral," a second voice replied.

"Fool thing to do," snorted the first speaker.

"What of it? Phil Kesler was a friend of mine. A damn good friend."

"Riskin' yore fool neck after he's dead ain't goin' to do him any good," growled Number One. "Suppose someone spotted yuh?"

"They won't. Anyway, what's the odds now? Like you say, this country is played out as far as we're concerned. With Phil alive things was goin' off smooth—easiest money any of us ever made, but with him gone we wouldn't last a month."

"Might git away with a couple or three more hauls but it ain't worth chancin' our necks for," said Number One. "We've picked this range pretty clean. No use gittin' hoggish. We'll make the last raid tonight an' it'll be a good one. You'll find the stuff in the same place. Let 'em rest a day an' haze 'em out tomorrow night an' keep 'em movin'. If everything goes off smooth me an' the rest of the boys will meet yuh across the line in Las Vegas thirty days from now. We can't quit too soon."

"Better not all quit at the same time neither."

"I sabe that. I'll be the last to go. I got a job to do before I leave this country. Thought I'd taken care of it yesterday, but I slipped up. Now I ain't so sure I had the right man. I'm goin' back up town now. Better stick around here somewheres ten or fifteen minutes an' then git yore hoss an' blow."

"I'll bed down in back of this corral fence for a spell, Clint. Good luck to yuh tonight. I'll see yuh in Las Vegas a month from now."

"Sure," replied the man whom Randy now knew to be Clint Messner. "So long, Rube."

RANDY heard them move away from the stable. With a jumble of thoughts flashing through his mind he waited a couple minutes, then moved cautiously toward the front of the stable. Upon reaching it he halted, took a rope down from a peg, puckered his lips and started whistling as once more he went to the rear of the barn. This time there was no pause. He jerked open the door and stepped into the corral.

The enclosure was a small, high board affair. He looked around, saw a half dozen loose horses in one of the far corners and moved toward them. Of Clint Messner and his companion he saw nothing. Singling out a chunky bay with a Bar 3

brand, Randy dropped a loop over his head and led him into the barn. There he faced a bigger problem than hunting out the girl's horse. Out of the dozen or so saddles hung on pegs along the runway or tossed on the floor of the office he had no way of knowing which one belonged to Neva Kesler.

He looked them over, finally picked the one with the shortest stirrups and cinched it on the horse. It was a light, short-seated saddle, one he thought a girl might ride. His guess proved to be good when, upon leading the horse up to the hotel, he questioned her regarding the saddle.

"I'll get my own horse an' be back after you in just a minute," he said and struck off toward the hitch rack where he had left his mount.

He had other things on his mind besides getting his horse. He had startling news

to spill in the ears of more than one man. In this luck favored him for, while passing a restaurant, Funny Fallon stepped out on the sidewalk, a toothpick in his mouth and a satisfied expression on his homely face.

The deputy grinned broadly. "I take it all back," he said. "You got more go-ahead than I figured. I seen yuh talkin' to that gal. I likewise seen yuh fetch her hoss up. Where yuh goin' now?"

RANDY crowded him away from the doorway and close to the building where, in a low voice he told the deputy what he had overheard.

"Wal, can yuh beat that," Funny snorted in a hoarse whisper when he had finished. "Messner, eh? Why that dang, green-eyed cow tick. That feller never did look right t' me. I guess we git us together a posse an' go out on a roundup t'night, eh?"

"Nothin' like it," vetoed Randy. "We know who's workin' this end of it but we don't know who's on the other. Only way to find out is catch 'em an' to do that we gotta let 'em walk into a trap. Way I get it Messner an' several others—the whole blamed Diamond T crew I take it which amounts to four men right now—make the raid an' then spot the stuff for another gang to come in an' pick up. More'n likely some canyon on the Diamond T. I told yuh them cows couldn't be moved clean outa the country in one night."

"An' the game is to find out where them cows is spotted, eh?"

"Sure, if we want to catch the rest of the gang. Let Messner make his raid tonight, then surround the place where they're held an' wait for the other gang to come after them tomorrow night. That way we'll get the whole works dead to rights."

"Yeah, if we find where they're holdin' the stuff. Yuh ain't told me how we're gonna do that, yet."

"Follow them an' find out where they take the stuff," outlined Randy. "Don't bother Messner. Let him move the stuff. We can pick him up any time. You get word to Buckley, my dad an' Rusty an' the rest of the outfits. Tell them to have every man out on the range tonight an' keep their eyes open, but for God's sake tell them not to go off half-cocked an' spoil the play. All they gotta do is bed down an' keep a lookout. After Messner gets the stuff on the move all they gotta do is let a couple, three men follow along to see where the stuff is being taken. If more than that try to follow Messner, his boys might get hep to it."

"Where you goin' that yuh can't spread this news around yore own self?" asked Funny suspiciously.

"Messner mighta seen me come outa the stable an' figure I heard somethin'. If he sees me breezin' around amongst the cowmen he'll know blamed well I did. You

can get to them without arousing any suspicion."

"That sounds kinda logical, but the real reason is waitin' for yuh over at the hotel, I reckon," grinned Funny. "Wal, I ain't one to stand in the way of bloomin' love or love in bloom or whatever yuh calls the cause o' that silly look yuh got on yore face."

"Oh, thassal right," chuckled Funny as Randy started to protest. "I've seen it strike better men than you. It's like lightnin', yuh never know where it's goin' to hit or how bad. I'm goin' to make it a point to be standin' beside Cleve Tansey when yuh rides outa town with her. I might mebbe learn somethin' new an' different about how to mix up my cuss words. Reckon I'll find him down in the Little Nugget. He was nursin' a bottle the last I seen."

Chapter VI

A SCORE IS SETTLED

MANY an eye was turned toward Randy and Neva Kesler as they rode down the main street of Lupine. When even with the Little Nugget, Randy saw her stiffen in the saddle, pull to an unceremonious halt. Thinking Cleve Tansey had taken a drunken notion to barge out of the saloon and accost them, Randy spun his horse to put a halt to Tansey's interference before it got well under way. But though several men were grouped in front of the saloon he saw nothing of Tansey.

Puzzled, Randy flashed a glance at the girl, caught the direction of her gaze and turned to see a thick-set, bewhiskered individual standing beside a black horse at the hitch rack. As Randy watched, the fellow turned his back on them, lifted a stirrup and busied himself with taking a pull on the latigo. Randy looked back to the girl, saw that she had started on again and nudged his horse to fall in beside her.

Silently they rode out of town. Nor did any word pass between them until Lupine lay a mile behind them. She looked over at him then, found he was regarding her quizzically and said:

"That man back there—do you know him?"

"Never saw him before," denied Randy.

She said no more for a time, seemingly content to ride with her thoughts, but Randy noted that she flashed him many a covert glance as they covered the next two miles. At length she seemed to reach some sort of decision and again opened the conversation.

"Why are you interested in learning who killed my brother?" she queried, looking at him earnestly.

He gave his shoulders a hunch. "I dunno. Just curious at first I reckon. But now it's beginnin' to look like this country didn't give him a square deal."

"In what way?"

"Well, just because he served time in Arizona for rustlin', folks here figured it had to be him gettin' away with their cows. I happen to know different now."

"I wish I could believe that," she said

He fixed her with a sharp glance. "Can't yuh?"

"No," she shook her head. A wistful expression came into her eyes. "Phil was all right when we first came here. It seemed he wanted to go straight—make something out of himself. Then about six months ago he changed. I believe I understand the reason why, now," her eyes found his face, clung there. "That man back in Lupine—his name is Rube Myres. He was sent to the penitentiary along with Phil on the same rustling charge. They were friends. He is no good. If he has been here long then I know he is mixed up in the rustling that has been going on and if he is in on it then Phil was too."

RANDY said nothing, there was nothing that he could say. After a moment she continued.

"Oh, I've suspected it for a long time. Phil always had money and yet we have made nothing from the Block K. I tried

to talk with him—reason with him but it was no use. I knew something tragic would happen to him and I steeled myself toward that day."

"Clint Messner," said Randy. "Did yuh know him down in Arizona, too?"

"No."

"But your brother did?"

"Apparently."

"How did your brother feel about Messner spilling all he knew about his past life?"

"He professed to resent it, but I know they were friendly. I heard them talking once."

"Did Messner make a habit of comin' here to your ranch?"

"He came only the once that I know of. Phil wasn't pleased over that visit. He said that if people learned they were friends their game would be up."

"What game?"

"I don't know. Rustling, I suppose."

"Do you think Messner killed your brother?"

"I hardly believe so. As I've told you, they were apparently friends."

"But they mighta fell out," persisted Randy.

"Even so I don't believe Mr. Messner is guilty. He would have used a gun. It's a whole lot easier to believe that Mr. Buckley and his crew did it."

"Why not Cleve Tansey?" Randy shot at her.

IT WAS evident by her quick change of expression that the question didn't please her.

"That's rather foolish," she said somewhat sharply.

"Maybe," conceded Randy. "But yuh gotta look at a thing like this from all angles. They tell me that Cleve an' your brother wasn't friendly. Your brother ordered him to stay away from the Block K, didn't he?"

"Yes, but he would have done the same to any other man who tried to make a practice of coming there. He said it was because of me, but I think he had other reasons. He was afraid Mr. Tansey might find out something."

"How about Cleve," prodded Randy, careless of the fact that he was trodding on rather thin ice. "Didn't he kinda resent bein' ordered around by your brother?"

"I suppose so. Not to the extent, however, of doing what you seem inclined to accuse him of."

"I ain't accusin' anybody," denied Randy. "That's up to the sheriff."

Her brow knit. "Then why——"

"For the same reason you're tellin' all this stuff to me instead of the sheriff," he cut her short. "You're anxious to get to

the bottom of this thing without gettin' all mixed up with the law an' so am I. Besides, I got special reasons for mixin' in this thing."

"Have you?"

"I sure have," declared Randy and was glad of the approaching dusk that helped to veil the color that flooded his face. "I'm honin' to tell you about them when we get better acquainted. You got any objections to me wearing a trail over to the Block K?"

"None that I can think of right now."

"Well, don't get to thinkin' too hard," cautioned Randy.

IT WAS dark when they reached the Block K. Randy went in the house with her, lighted the lamps and prepared to leave.

"Will you be all right here alone?" he questioned anxiously.

"Of course," she scoffed. "What danger is there?"

"No danger, I reckon," said Randy, but his thoughts flashed to Cleve Tansey. "Well, I gotta be goin'. Can I ride over tomorrow maybe?"

"Anytime," she said, warmly.

"Thanks. An' the next dance that comes along—you'll let me take yuh?"

"I'd be delighted."

"Reckon I'll feel somethin' like that myself."

They both laughed and Randy backed out the door.

As Randy rode away from the Block K he found it hard to put Neva Kesler out of his mind, but he had to, he told himself. This was to be a big night somewhere out on the range. If things went off as planned they would soon have the mystery of the disappearing cows solved. There was no telling where Messner and his cohorts would strike, but if Funny Fallon had got word to the cowmen all herds would be guarded. Randy only hoped that they wouldn't become too anxious and show their hand while Messner and his crew were moving the herd.

For himself, Randy had no plans other than to ride to the Double R and join his father and the crew. It was while riding under a big black oak tree before reaching the road that Randy heard a noise above him. Instinctively he ducked low and sank home the spurs, but too late. Something crashed down on him with terrific force. He left the saddle, hurtled through air and crashed to the ground with the solid weight of a man on top of him.

FOR a moment the fall dazed him. When his senses did clear it was to the tune of hammering fists that were pommeling his face and body. His first move was a vicious, upward lunge that unseated the man atop him. The man cursed, pitched sideways and Randy grappled with him.

"You dirty hi-binder," came the angry, liquor polluted voice of Cleve Tansey. "I'll teach you to horn in on me. I'm gonna ——"

The rest of his sentence was cut off as Randy's fist crashed into his mouth, splitting his lips, loosening his teeth. As more blows rained against his face Tansey suddenly forgot all about fighting back, as he bent every effort to grapple, tie-up the flailing arms of Randy who was now above him in full command of things.

But, although he had been taken unawares at first Randy wasn't to be tied up in a knot now. If it was rough and tumble fight that Tansey wanted, that's what he would get. Lurching forward and pinning both of Tansey's arms with his knees, Randy sent blow after blow crashing into his face. The grudge of years standing surged up within him, maddened him beyond all reason. It wasn't until he felt Tansey go limp that he ceased pounding, and then he felt no elation over having conquered the man. Instead he was sorry that Tansey had gone out. He wanted to mete out more punishment.

But since there is little satisfaction derived from beating an unconscious man, Randy got groggily to his feet, shook his head to clear away the lingering mists and spat something warm and salty which he suspected must be blood. He moved in a circle then in search of his horse which he finally found twenty paces from the tree with trailing reins, ears pricked forward.

The animal snorted, lunged away, then halted as Randy spoke to him. A moment later he was mounted and headed off across country in search of a spring or stream where he could bathe his face and head and clean away the evidence of battle.

Whether Tansey was alive or dead he didn't know and cared less. The man had made a foul attack on him, had asked for what he received. Had he accomplished his purpose he would no doubt have left Randy in the same shape if not worse. In all likelihood, under the cargo of whiskey that he had taken aboard, Tansey would have perhaps kept pounding until all life had left Randy's body.

Chapter VII

CAPTURE

DOWN in the bottom of a ravine Randy found a spring. He built a dirt dam across the course of the run-off, waited for the pool to fill and soused his head in it. The cold water cut away the blood, soothed his bruised features and when he once more mounted and started toward the Double R he felt much better.

Cleve Tansey's attack on him had served to make him forget Clint Messner and his gang of rustlers. It was due to this, perhaps that he rode blindly into a dark, narrow canyon and experienced another startling surprise when a rope swished through the air, the loop settling over his head and shoulders to pin his arms to his sides.

Automatically Randy's heels went back. The spurs dug into his horse and the roan bolted. Randy was lifted from the saddle, jerked back over the horse's rump to hit the ground on his neck and shoulders. A grunt escaped him, a sharp pain coursed up through his neck and a thousand dancing stars twinkled before his eyes.

Hazily he felt himself roughly pounced upon. He struggled to free himself, but it must have been a vain attempt for he was quickly rolled over and his hands bound behind him. Turned roughly over on his back again a match flared for a second close to his face.

"Know him?" a voice inquired.

"Randy Reid!" another ejaculated. "This is luck."

"Yeah, bad luck," grunted the first speaker. "Any more around, I wonder?"

"He is alone, looks like."

"What'll we do—cave in his head an' leave him here? Can't take a chance on sinkin' a slug in him here."

The match burned down to the man's fingers and was hastily dropped and stepped on.

"We ain't knockin' him off—yet," commanded a voice that sounded vaguely familiar to Randy. "Rope him on his horse an' fetch him along."

"You gone crazy!" exploded the other. "What in hell would we do with him—we gotta live in this country a while yet."

"Do as I tell you," the other man spoke sharply. "I want this feller—alive. Take him to that old shack down by Bird Springs an' stay there with him."

There was further argument, but finally Randy felt himself being lifted and dumped across a saddle where he was roped securely. Thereafter life became just one jolting batch of misery for him as the horse he was tied on was led away through the night.

HOW long they traveled he could only guess, but it seemed hours, before the horse halted in front of an old dilapidated one-room shack. The shack meant nothing to him, but if it was situated near Bird Springs he had a pretty good idea where he was, for the only Bird Springs he knew of were those situated in the bottom of a canyon on the eastern sweep of the Diamond T range.

However, they had petered out five or six years ago and since then the only Diamond T cows that got over on that part

of the range were those that were foolish enough to stray there for there was no other water close. Randy supposed that this was the reason he had been brought here—no chance rider was liable to come this way.

His body ached from the jolting it had received. He let out a groan and a voice close beside him said:

"Awake, are yuh?"

"Hell, I been awake all the time," snorted Randy.

"Hope you enjoyed the ride," said the other, proving that he had a sense of humor. "Welcome home. It ain't much for looks, but it'll beat roostin' where yuh are."

He went to work on the ropes, got them loose and commanded Randy to slide to the ground. Randy slid, was caught and steadied and pushed toward the doorway, his hands still bound behind him. His legs were stiff and cramped and he was glad enough to sink to the dirt floor once they were inside.

His captor roped his feet securely, then left. Randy heard him strip the gear off the horses and lead them away. A few minutes later the fellow was back. He rummaged around for a time and finally came over to hunker down close to where Randy lay.

"No candles or nothin' around here it looks like," he confided. "Hope you ain't scared o' the dark."

"To hell with the dark," growled Randy. "I hope I ain't got to spend the night in this shape. These ropes are diggin' in."

"Know just how yuh feel an' yuh got my sympathy, pardner," said the other. "Still, I don't know as they's much I can do about it till daylight. I'm what yuh might call a stranger here m'self. I don't know what comforts we've got an' which we ain't an' I can't do no lookin' around 'cause I only got three matches left an' I need them for smokes, which reminds me I'm feelin' in the need of one right now."

RANDY heard the fellow get out his tobacco and papers and roll a cigarette. Presently a hand explored his face, discovered his mouth and the cigarette was shoved against his lips.

"Open yore yap an' take this cigarette," ordered the fellow. "Just because we happen to be on different sides of the fence ain't no reason we can't be sociable. Tobacco's funny thataway. It don't seem to give a damn who it builds up a habit with."

There was a moment's delay while the outlaw rolled a cigarette for himself. Then a match flared, was held to Randy's cigarette, after which the congenial captor set fire to his own.

"Thanks," said Randy, tonguing the cigarette to one corner of his mouth. "You ain't such a bad hombre after all."

"Depends on what yuh call bad," stated the other. "Far as the law goes I'm a plumb lost soul."

"Didn't know the law paid a heap of attention to souls," chuckled Randy.

"I ain't got none so I wouldn't know," said the outlaw. "I'm what yuh might call a victim of circumstances. I takes things pretty much as they're dished out to me. Tonight the boss says keep you alive so I feels right kindly towards yuh. Tomorrow mebbe he'll figure yuh look better dead an' I'll sink a slug in yuh without havin' no regrets. That's life, feller, an' I've seen plenty of it."

"I wouldn't be surprised," said Randy and decided that in all likelihood his strange companion had spoken the truth.

TO HIM life was just a game to be played whichever way the cards were dealt. Randy pulled at the cigarette until it felt hot against his lips, then spat out the stub. In checking over the ropes the outlaw loosened the one that bound Randy's wrists so that the circulation of blood could once more penetrate his numb fingers. Randy expressed his gratefulness and tried to get some sleep. But it was a long time before his eyes would stay closed and then he slept spasmodically. He was glad when daylight arrived.

His captor had apparently slept outside. It was sunup when he put in an appearance and Randy got his first good look at him. He saw a man big in stature—though it ran mostly to bone—whose seamed features showed the strain of possibly fifty years. What evidence of his hard life had crept into his face was offset by a pair of twinkling gray eyes.

"Looks like we picked a poor roost," was his greeting. "No water, no grub. How about steppin' out an' enjoyin' the mornin' sun?"

"I'm so blamed stiff I doubt if I'll ever limber up enough to walk again," groaned Randy.

"That'll all come out with a little exercise. I'll tie a rope around yore middle an' let yuh gallop around a while. Since you an' me ain't got no hard feelings between us I reckon I won't have to tell yuh that I usually hit what I shoot at."

"You've got all the cards in the deck," grinned Randy, thinking of his own empty holster and his gun which now reposed stuck down in the waistband of the outlaw's overalls.

AN HOUR later when they returned to the interior of the shack the outlaw tied only his feet with the riata, taking the other end of it across the room with him where he squatted down to await further developments. So far as making a try for freedom Randy was still helpless, but it was a great relief not to have his hands bound.

Time dragged after that. It wasn't till shortly before noon that the outlaw heard what he had evidently been listening for. Hoofbeats sounded, drew closer and a low hail came drifting across the hot air to them.

"Yuh there, Bill?"

The outlaw went to the door, peered out.

"Dang near time you got here," he called to the man outside. "I'm so dang dry my tongue's hangin' out a foot."

"Figured you'd need grub and water. I fetched both with me."

In another moment the man Bill stepped aside to allow entrance for Clint Messner. Messner came inside, stared at Randy a minute and nodded.

"How are yuh, Reid?"

"Hello, Messner," replied Randy. "I figured you the big auger of this outfit."

"What outfit?" queried Messner, seemingly puzzled.

Randy decided to play dumb. He shrugged. "Maybe you snake fellers outa the saddle an' bring 'em to a place like this just for fun."

Messner shook his head. "I had a good reason for bringing you here, Reid. The quicker you talk the quicker you get loose."

Randy grinned. "Hell, I ain't got any objections to talkin'. What do yuh want to talk about?"

"Phil Kesler," stated Messner. "Who killed him?"

Randy stared at him vacantly. "How should I know?"

"That's what I've wondered, but I took you at yore word," Messner's eyes bored into his face. "Remember up in Kelsey you said in front of a whole damn crowd that you knew who killed Kesler?"

RANDY stared at the man a moment and finally burst into laughter.

"That was only a bluff," he explained.

"Yeah—" Messner's eyes narrowed. "Wal, now is a damn good time to back up that bluff. You was the first one to see Phil after they got him. If there was any sign you read it. Now I'm waitin' to hear yuh tell me who you figure done it."

"Oh, if that's all yuh want to hear I can tell it to yuh in one breath," said Randy. "I figure you killed Phil Kesler, Messner, but so far I ain't got any proof of it."

"Me!" exploded Messner. "Hell, I was his friend!"

"Why spill yore brains, Clint?" spoke up the outlaw, Bill.

"What's the difference?" growled Messner. "It'll never git any further. This feller seen somethin'—he knows somethin'—too much, I reckon."

Bill shrugged, took a pull from the canteen Messner had brought and hunkered down beside the door.

"Did Buckley string up the kid?" Messner stepped closer to fire at Randy.

"Is that the way you figure?" parried Randy.

"It's the way I did figure."

"So it was you I seen up on that ridge—it was you tried to dry gulch Buckley."

"Shore it was me," Messner recklessly admitted. "I'd have got him if you and that fool deputy hadn't showed up. At that I reckon I'd have got the wrong man."

"How yuh figure that?" queried Randy.

"Hunch, mebbe," said Messner. "Anyway, I can't go around dry-gulchin' every short-horn on this range tryin' to git the right one. I'm gonna be sure this time. That's why I've got you here. You know well enough—read it on yore face up in Kelsey that night."

RANDY didn't know who killed Kesler, but it suddenly dawned on him that his only chance to go on living rested in pretending that he did and refusing to tell. Messner was out for revenge, that was plain. And he was willing to go to any lengths to get that revenge.

"Didn't know you was such a hell of a good friend of Kesler's," retorted Randy. "Way I heard it you an' Kesler was ene-

mies. Wasn't it you come to this country an' blabbed yore head about him havin' been sent up for rustlin' down in Arizona?"

This seemed to strike Messner funny for he treated himself to a broad grin.

"Guess I had 'em all fooled," he bragged. "Shore it was me who spilled it about Phil. Knowed if folks hereabouts heard he was an ex-convict they'd start watchin' him an' that's just what they done. They watched him an' his outfit while the cows just slipped out from under their noses," he laughed, then suddenly sobered and rasped: "Who killed Kesler, Reid? I ain't got much time to waste here with you."

"Think I'd tell you even if I did know?" queried Randy. "I ain't that crazy. Soon as I spill what I know you aim to sink a slug in me," he broke off, grinned and shook his head. "Oh, no, Messner. Any information yuh get outa me you'll have to blast out."

"Then I'll blast it out!" declared Messner. "It wasn't my idea to snake you off here an' ask you questions, but you stumbled into somethin' last night like a blind fool. I know it an' you know it. That's why yo're here an' not because I figure I need you to help me git the skunk that killed Kesler. I'll git him anyway, but it might save a couple, three of yore friends if you spill what you know. If I have to hunt out the killer I might make a couple, three mistakes like I did on Buckley 'fore I git him."

RANDY was in a spot and he knew it. Messner figured that he knew about the rustling, probably was laboring under the wrong hunch that Randy had seen something before they had dropped a rope over his head. The man's disregard for what he said proved this to be so, and that careless talk told Randy one thing only too plainly—that he wasn't expected to leave this shack alive. Messner intended to pump what information he could out of him and then kill him.

Deciding this to be the case Randy didn't see where he could make his position any worse by learning a few things himself. He put forth a question.

"Was Kesler in on this rustlin' with you?"

The blunt question startled Messner for a moment, then he smiled thinly.

"Thought you knew about it," he said. He pondered a moment, apparently amused at his thoughts for a thin smile rested on his lips. Finally he said. "Like to hear how a really good outfit rustles a range?"

"I figure I already know that," said

Randy. "Yuh work it with two gangs. One lives on the range, makes the raids and spots the cows and another comes in an' takes them outa the country."

Messner's eyes lighted. "Yo're smart, kid. Too bad yore morals ain't different. But there's one angle yuh left out an' a dang important one. While the outfits watched Kesler we took the cows," he laughed shortly. "An' the biggest joke about that is that Kesler never rustled a cow in this country. All he done was sit tight an' draw suspicion."

"But he pulled down his cut," pointed out Randy.

"Why not?" said Messner. "He was the most important spoke in the wheel. When he went, the game went," his face hardened. "That's why I'm gonna git the skunk who plugged him!"

"Then it ain't because you an' Kesler was friends that yuh want to get his killer," said Randy.

"In this game there ain't a hell of a lotta room for sentiment," replied Messner. "But nobody ever done me a dirty trick an' got away with it."

"How about Tansey?" questioned Randy. "Is he in on the steal?"

"No!" Messner bit off the word. He bent forward, his chin protruding. "I been thinkin' about Tansey—thinkin' about him a heap." He paused, waited a second while his eyes scorched Randy's face and barked. "Was it Tansey who killed Kesler?"

THE words were exactly what Randy was thinking. It must be Tansey who had killed Kesler. He was almost sure of it now—should have known it before. A slow grin spread over his face as he met Messner's gaze.

"Why don't yuh ask Tansey about that?" he invited.

"By God, Tansey's the man!" exclaimed Messner. "Phil was scared to have him snoopin' around—told him to get off an' stay off. Yeah, I reckon Tansey's the man I'm lookin' for."

"Better make sure before yuh go shootin' him up," warned Randy. "Yut might start a pot boilin' that'll leak over an' scald yuh."

Messner seemed to heed what he said. For a long time he stared into Randy's face. Finally he cursed under his breath and moved toward the door.

"Don't give him anything to eat or drink, Bill," he ordered the outlaw. "I'll starve it out of him. We've got plenty of time."

"Suppose they miss him an' git to pokin' around?" inquired Bill.

"I'll know about it if they do. If that happens they'll find him a long ways from here an' they won't have to look twice to see what happened to him. I'll be back in the mornin'. In the meantime keep a watch on him. Better tie his hands again. Can't take no chances on him gittin' loose now. He knows too much."

"What he didn't know you told him," grunted Bill in a low voice when Messner had gone. He turned to Randy. "Wal, I always said yuh can't tell by the way a man wears his face what religion he is. Always figured Clint pretty solid up till now, but he's shore slippin'. Actin' plumb foolish over this. Now if he had any sense he'd knock you off without no more waitin' an' forgit all about who killed Kesler. I reckon he wouldn't be carin' a heap who killed Kesler if he knowed it was Kesler that killed them two cow waddies down in Arizony an' dang near got us all stuck away in the pen."

"Kesler a killer, you say?" Randy spoke his surprise.

"Killer—naw, he weren't no killer. He just dry gulched a couple cow hands that got in his way. Guess them sheriffs down in there are still lookin' for the hombre who done it," he emitted a cackling laugh. "They'll shore have a hot tip if they catch up with him now. Reckon Phil is shore 'nough down in hell heavin' coal or whatever 'tis they feed the fires down there."

TAKING another pull at the canteen, Bill squatted down to eat some of the grub that Messner had brought. Randy

eyed the grub hungrily but it was a drink of water that he wanted most. Interpreting his gaze Bill grinned at him and said:

"I'd like to cut you in on this, kid, but orders is orders. You willing to do some talkin'?"

"Hell, I don't know anything," swore Randy. "I don't know any more about who killed Kesler than you do."

"Ain't thirsty enough yet," opined Bill. "Time yore tongue swells up yore memory might improve."

He finished eating, washed it down with another swig from the canteen and got out his makings. The cigarette rolled he fished for a match, failed to find one and cursed feelingly.

"Damn it anyway," he complained. "I went an' forgot to git any matches from Clint."

"I oughta have some," said Randy.

He dug into his shirt pocket, pulled out tobacco and papers but no matches.

"In my pants, maybe," he said hopefully.

He pulled his bound feet under him and raised himself to a squatting position as he fished into his overalls pockets for matches. Bill watched him with interest. Finally he got up and came over to where Randy was taking inventory.

"Find any?" he questioned eagerly.

"Think so," grinned Randy, his right hand buried deep in his pocket. He seemed to be having a hard time of it. "There's one down in there if I can just get hold of it," he explained.

"Wal, that's somethin'," said Bill and bent down to watch proceedings with greater interest.

FINALLY Randy's hand came from his pocket with a lone match clasped between thumb and forefinger. Bill's eyes glued to the match. What he failed to see or heed was a tightening of Randy's muscles as he gathered himself for a spring that would either mean his freedom or an unholy beating at the hands of the outlaw.

Bill's body came forward to take the match. His body was bent at the waist, his chin exposed and protruding. It was at this target that Randy aimed his lunge as he shot his body upward with all the strength in his legs. His aim was true. The top of his head crashed against Bill's chin with a force that almost drove the outlaw's jawbones through his neck.

The force of the blow sent the outlaw toppling backward where he hit the floor of the shack flat on his back. So hard was the blow that stars shot out before Randy's eyes. The room reeled. He had all but completed a knock-out blow on himself. When the mists cleared away his eyes centered on the outlaw and he gathered himself to continue the attack. But there was no call for it. That one deadening blow had laid the man out cold.

It took Randy but a moment to loosen the rope that bound his feet. In a moment he had Bill tied securely. With this taken

care of he rolled a cigarette and sat back to rub the circulation back into his feet which were cramped from being tied in the one position.

It was characteristic of him that once free he seemed to be in no hurry to get away from the place. He drank from the canteen, helped himself to the grub that Messner had brought and finally when he did prepare to leave he took his own gun and that of the outlaw from Bill's person.

Next thing was to find his horse. Fifteen minutes' search brought him to a little pocket-like canyon brush-littered but practically void of grass. A tiny trickle of water seeping out of a crack in the rocks at the head-end of the canyon had been

dammed up to form a pool, but the seep was so slow that the pool had scarcely more than started to gather. Not enough there for either horse so he turned Bill's horse loose and led his own back to the shack where he cinched on his saddle and swung aboard.

He was none too familiar with this country, but he pointed his horse in the general direction of the Double R and gave him his head.

Chapter VIII

CLEAN-UP

WHILE crossing the Diamond T range he kept to the washes and ravines to lessen the chances of being seen by Messner or some of the Diamond T crew. It was not until he had crossed onto the Double R that he rode with a feeling of safety.

Coming up out of a ravine to top a long ridge he rode almost head-on into a body of eight men with Sheriff Dave Brawley and Buckley heading the procession.

"Randy Reid!" exclaimed the sheriff at sight of him. "Where in hell did you get to anyway?"

In as few words as possible Randy told them what had happened.

"Things are pickin' up," remarked the sheriff when he had finished. "I was some worried about how we was goin' to hang anything on Messner an' his crew."

"Yuh followed out the orders I gave Funny, didn't yuh?" queried Randy.

"We shore did," said the sheriff. "Yore dad an' Funny an' a couple Double R boys followed Messner clean over to the hole where they left the stuff. It was Double R that they made a raid on this time. Rest of us never seen hide nor hair of them. I told yore dad an' Funny that they should have opened up on the damned rustlers after they seen where the stuff was goin'. But yore dad figured some of the outside gang might be hangin' around an' it would give our play away, so they come along back without botherin' Messner. Since we didn't catch Messner in the act I was thinkin' we might have a tough time provin' anything on him. Yuh gotta have evidence when yuh take a man into court."

"That's why hangin' is the only sure way to git the rustlers outa the way," spoke up Buckley. "We all know that it was Messner doin' the rustlin' but since we didn't crack down on him while he was at it, the sheriff has been tellin' us that maybe we couldn't cinch the devils. I told him to ride back to Lupine an' us boys would see that the damn thieves got what was comin' to them."

"Yeah, an' I told you to forget that lynch talk," retorted the sheriff. "Looks like we've had some luck. With what Randy can tell on them gents I reckon we won't have any trouble convicting them in this country."

"You talk like you were going to take them alive," said Randy.

"We're on our way to the Diamond T now," Brawley explained. "Aim to get there an' git set. When Messner an' the crew come in we'll surround them an' call on them to lay down an' quit. If they show fight why I reckon we'll give them a fight."

"Sounds all right," said Randy. "Where's dad and Funny?"

"Them and a dozen of the boys are over on Tansey's east range watchin' them cows, waitin' for the outside gang to come after them. After we take Messner we'll ride over an' join them. Let's get goin'. If we kill much more time Messner an' his crew will be in at the Diamond T before we git there. Might be there anyway. We got no way of knowin' whether they're at the ranch or out ridin' somewheres."

"We know where Cleve Tansey is," one of the group spoke up and laughed as he looked at Randy. "Been lookin' at them bruises on yore face—wonder if yo're the feller who jumped Tansey an' beat the livin' hell outa him? He's up in Kelsey plumb flat on his back in bed an' they say he's liable to be there a couple, three days. I'd like to seen that fight."

RANDY knew who had done the beating on Tansey but he said nothing.

"Been wondering about Tansey," mused the sheriff. "You reckon he's mixed up in this rustlin', Randy?"

"That's what I thought at first, but I can dang near swear that he ain't, now," replied Randy. "That's a whole new crew he's got on the Diamond T—Messner's crew who drifted in here one by one an' got hired. Messner and his crew are the ones that have been getting away with the cows—the only ones," he added as an afterthought.

Brawley nodded. "Looks that way."

Conversation lagged thereafter as they rode steadily toward the Diamond T buildings. Randy rode up ahead with Buckley and the sheriff until the buildings cropped into sight. Then he dropped back to the rear ranks in case Messner was at the ranch. He didn't want to be in the foreground where he would be immediately recognized.

The sheriff had laid plans, where they were to station themselves, what they were to do in case hostilities started, but all these passed to the discard when upon riding into the ranch yard Clint Messner and another man stepped out of the bunkhouse to watch their approach.

The posse was within twenty feet of them when suddenly Messner's body jerked. His head craned forward on his neck, his eyes drilled the group and centered on Randy. Without warning his hand flashed to his gun. He yelled something at his companion who bolted for the bunkhouse. Messner's gun cleared leather, came up. But Randy, knowing Messner as he did, had been looking for the move. His own gun came out a split second before Messner's and spat lead.

Messner's gun exploded harmlessly as Randy's first bullet thudded into his chest. He staggered, sagged at the knees and went down under the rain of two more slugs. The other outlaw whirled to fire two hasty shots at the group and then lunged for the door of the bunkhouse. It was his last act for a bullet nailed him to the door sill.

"Spread out! Hunt cover!" the sheriff bellowed orders.

HOWEVER, the orders were not heeded for already the group was disintegrating as men spurred their horses in search of cover. Two of them never found cover for the guns of the remaining outlaws inside the bunkhouse picked them off. It was the signal for a rain of lead to be poured into the bunkhouse by the rest of the aroused posse.

Randy left his horse and dived into a pile of old rusted machinery heaped out beside the machine shed. When he righted himself and went to peer around he saw the sheriff and Buckley following his move. Randy worked his way further into the mess, made room for them.

"Don't guess there's any use me wastin' my breath to call on them to surrender, but law is law," said Brawley and raised his voice. "You in the bunkhouse there—stick yore hands up high an' come out in single file. If yuh don't——"

The remainder of his speech was cut off by a bullet that whined past his face and rang against the iron wheel of a mowing machine.

"I guess they don't," grunted Brawley.

"He don't," said Buckley dryly. "I nailed him plumb center."

"That leaves two more," summed up Brawley.

"One," corrected Randy. "They was only four in the crew besides Messner an' I left one of them tied up in that shack over by Bird Springs."

"Well, hell," snorted the sheriff, "let's cut that damn bunkhouse down with lead then. One man shore can't hold off the bunch of us."

For a time they were too busy throwing lead to talk. A lull came and a man down in front of the bunkhouse yelled.

"I got me one. How many more left?"

"That oughta make it," called back the sheriff, "but have a care before you go showin' yoreself."

SILENCE reigned as all settled down for a time to await developments.

"Guess that winds up the rustlin' on this range," commented the sheriff. "We'll clean up on the rest of them tonight when they come after them critters an' the thing will be finished." He thought a moment and mused. "Funny how a man can make mistakes, ain't it? We all kinda figured it was Kesler doin' the rustlin' just because he happened to have a bad record before he came to this country. Guess we never gave the poor devil a chance around here."

Randy looked over at Buckley. Their eyes met, held a moment and then Buckley's shifted. Randy's heart gave a jump. If he had ever read guilt in a man's eyes it was in Buckley's. In a flash it dawned on him that Buckley really was the man who had lynched Phil Kesler. With this knowledge his mind flashed back over the events. The evidence had pointed toward Buckley from the first. He had suspected Kesler of rustling his cows, had called on the sheriff to get the proof on Kesler. Then as time went on and the sheriff seemed to be doing nothing, Buckley decided to take things into his own hands. He had promised that he would string up Kesler if the sheriff didn't do something and he had lived up to that promise.

The evidence had been clear against Buckley from the first, almost too pointed. Randy decided that it was this fact that had thrown him off the track, this and Buckley's total disregard for accusations.

He looked again at Buckley. Again their glances crossed. But this time it wasn't guilt in the cowman's eyes. Instead they harbored an expression that bordered on remorse as it was apparently being driven home to him that in his reckless haste he had taken the life of the wrong man.

Brawley, speaking again broke in on Randy's thoughts.

"Reckon Messner must have killed Kesler," the sheriff was summing up. "Them two had it in for each other ever since Messner spilled it about Kesler being a rustler in Arizona. Don't know what his idea in that was unless it was to throw suspicion on Kesler while he went ahead an' rustled this country. Seems like Messner would have shot him an' been done with it, but maybe he figured if he strung him up we'd think some cowman done it thinkin' Kesler was the rustler. That's the way it shapes up to me. What do you think, Randy?"

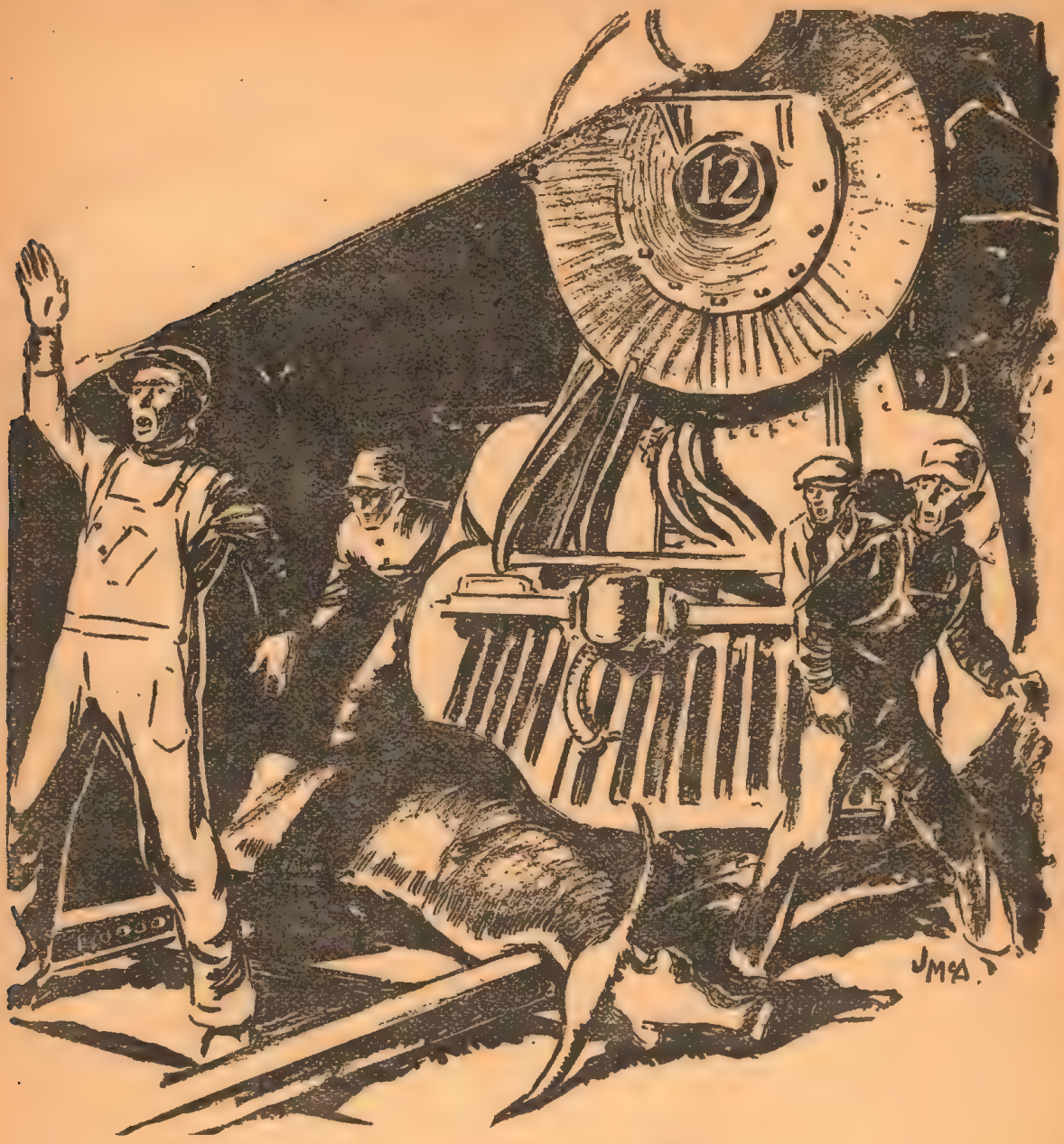
Randy was prompt in his reply, for he had already thought things out pretty well.

"That's the way I got it figured, Sheriff," he lied.

After all, he told himself, it was best to let the thing ride this way. Kesler had deserved what he got. Besides being a rustler he was a murderer. Buckley had evidently learned his lesson. He would think a long time before he would lynch another man. Randy supposed that he should tell the sheriff all that he knew but he could see where it would do no good. Instead, it could do considerable harm—bring a lot of unhappiness to Neva Kesler, and of a sudden he realized just how much Neva Kesler's happiness meant to him. Better that she thought that Messner killed her brother. Better that she never knew that he was a murderer. To tell what he knew would bring all this out. To say nothing would leave it buried as Randy decided that it should be.

When this trouble was all over with, when she had had time to forget her brother's death, Randy decided that he would ask her a question which suddenly seemed mighty important to him. So engrossed was he in these pleasant thoughts that he gave no heed to what was going on around him until he heard the sheriff's voice explaining from the door of the bunkhouse, where he had gone to investigate, that it was all over with.

The First Glow of Number Twelve's Headlight Could Be Seen, and Still the Dispatchers Hadn't Changed the Meet



BADLAND MEET

By DUANE HOPKINS

Author of "Target Yard," "Flying Coupling," etc.

WE'LL just call him John Doe. He happens to be the president of one of the great Western railroad systems, so it is perhaps best that his real name not be mentioned here. In fact, he himself needn't have been mentioned here, except that this is his favorite story. He loves to tell it. He will tell it to anyone who drops into his office and asks to hear it. And he will tell it in words about like these:

But, my dear sir, I am a very busy man! I just can't spare the time, you know. Still —er, um—well, maybe I have a free minute or two, if you really want to hear the story.

But here, let me draw up a chair for you. Sit down, my friend. There, that's better. Have a cigar? They're rather strong. And a light? Not at all, don't mention it.

Now you take railroading. A dull and uninteresting business, you may think, all bound up with strict rules and rigid regulations. Ah, yes. But I want to tell you, some very odd and unusual things have been known to happen in the railroad game. The operation of trains isn't always such a dull routine as it appears to the outsider. Any veteran of the steel trails can spin you yarns that sound almost unbelievable, and yet are strictly the truth—actual, personal experiences.

This is just such a tale that I'm going to tell you. This is the true story of the strangest happening I have ever witnessed in a long lifetime of railroad service. It is something I'll never forget to my dying day, and if you find any part of it hard to believe, remember that I saw the whole thing with my own eyes and that I am telling you nothing but the gospel truth. These are real facts, without any coloring or exaggeration. Now if you're settled and comfortable, we'll get started.

TO BEGIN with, we must go back a good many years to a place known as Wildhorse. At that time Wildhorse was just a prairie flagstop out on our Plains Division, a jerkwater cow country town. And to tell the truth, Wildhorse remains to this day the same thing, a jerkwater cow country town. You haven't, by any chance, ever been there? No, I thought not. Few visitors ever have business in Wildhorse, and most of our trains never stop there.

However, if you should ever have occasion to journey to that part of the country, I'd be very pleased to have you use our railroad to take you. The fare is $32.14, one way, Chicago to Wildhorse, Pullman berth extra. Never overlook a chance to advertise, is my motto. That's probably the only reason I'm president of this company. I know a hundred men down in the ranks who have more brains and more education than I have, but they don't push. They don't push either the road or themselves.

But I'm wandering. Let's get back to Wildhorse in the old days. I was just a youngster then, starting right at the bottom on my first railroad job. Officially, I was the assistant station agent at Wildhorse; but actually, I was only a sort of errand boy, janitor, and general baggage smasher down at the depot. Anything in the line of odd jobs fell to me, because there were only two other railroad employees on duty at Wildhorse. One was the station agent, who was my daytime working companion and superior. The other was Dave DuShane, the night telegrapher.

I want to say a word here about Dave DuShane, because this is really his story. He is the chief character in it, and I might say an extraordinary character. Physically, he was a strapping big fellow, tall and dark and powerful, with flashing black eyes and a great shock of coal-black hair. He was rather handsome, too, in a bold hard way. And when it came to telegraphing, he was as handy an operator as ever worked in Morse code.

NEVERTHELESS, Dave DuShane was no good. Yes, I mean no good. He was a wild one, a bad one, even in an era when all railroaders were pretty much a gang of toughs. It may seem strange to you today that railroad men were once considered the scum of the earth, but in the early days they were just about that. In general, they were a roughneck, profligate bunch.

Dave DuShane was one of the worst of the old hellion crowd. He caroused around and got in every low brawl that started in Wildhorse. He guzzled booze continuously, off duty and on. More than once he stole the ticket money from the depot office to gamble with. And when it

came to plain and fancy swearing, he could curse more devilishly than any section boss who ever hurled an oath at a Mex track laborer. Dave DuShane was utterly godless—I can't word that too strongly—an utterly godless man.

Now I am sorry to have to say these things about Dave, because he was my friend. Bad as he was, I am not ashamed to call him my friend. He always liked me, for some unaccountable reason. He was a bully, too, a fist-fighting, hard-mouthed bully. Yet he never bullied me, and the day that the Scorpion Butte outfit captured me, it was Dave DuShane who really saved my life.

Understand, the boys from up on the Scorpion Butte range weren't deliberate killers, any of them. They weren't rustlers or outlaws. But they were as reckless a

mob of cow waddies as ever handled a cattle drive. They were in Wildhorse shipping spring beef that day, and their ranch foreman made the mistake of paying them a month's wages before they started back home from town. Consequently, by sunset they were drunk to a man, raising merry hell down at the stock loading pens, and looking for some real fun. They got it when I walked down the track to the pens, after work, to see if their cattle cars were properly loaded for the night freight east.

THE first thing I knew, somebody had a lariat on me. The loop whistled through the air, dropped over my shoulders, tightened around my chest and arms, and jerked me sprawling on the ground. The next thing I knew, I was being dragged helplessly in circles behind a galloping horse, with the audience of punchers all whooping in delight. Gentle hazing, they'd have called it. But it was far from being gentle. The boys were too drunk to realize they were killing me, but that was just what they were doing. There were jagged boulders lying all about, and being dragged on my neck lickety-split through those rocks was deadly play. I'd certainly have had my skull split open if Dave DuShane hadn't suddenly appeared on the scene.

The last I'd seen of Dave, he was swigging whisky in one of the saloons up town. I never expected him to bob up at the shipping pens. But bob up he did, out of nowhere, and just in the nick of time. I was battered almost unconscious when I heard Dave's yelling curse rise above the laughter and shouts of the others. A moment later he came bursting through the knot of onlookers like a madman.

Nor did he pause an instant in the rescue. As the circling horse loped past, Dave dashed out after it and grabbed the rope that was dragging me. The lariat pulled him down sliding, but he hung on grimly and with his pocket knife slashed the rope in two. That freed us both, and we rolled to a stop together in a cloud of dust. Then Dave jumped up, jerked me to my feet also, shoved me behind him, and turned to face the cowhands.

For a minute there was only silence. My tormentors were too surprised at the sudden rescue to move or speak, and Dave just stood there calmly rolling up his shirt sleeves for combat, with his thick black hair hanging in his eyes and an ugly scowl on his face. Then the astonishment passed, and the entire group started for him in a rush. There must have been fifteen of them, but they could have been fifty for all Dave cared. A good gang fight was right up his alley, and he met the onslaught with flying fists and bellowed oaths. The first

three men to reach him went down in their tracks almost simultaneously.

"Pick on a skinny little lad, will you?" bawled Dave, his hefty arms pumping like pistons. "Now tackle somebody your own size, you blankety-blank thus-and-such's." Crack, slap, thud! "I do hate to hit a man when he's drunk, but I'm just as drunk as any of you, so—" Bam! Another cowboy bit the dust.

AT THAT, they might have overwhelmed him by weight of numbers, but Wildhorse suddenly woke up to what was going on. Entertainment! In a jiffy every saloon on the main street emptied and the occupants raced for the stock track. Nor did they come just as spectators. Their arrival started a grand free-for-all, with a hundred men slugging whoever happened to be within reach. The battle royal kept up joyously until all the combatants were either knocked out or winded and worn out. Then the whole thing was over as quickly as it had started. Everybody, including Dave, went back up town, had a few rounds of drinks together, and promptly forgot the pleasant little incident.

But I didn't forget it. I never forgot it. I always remembered that I owed my life to Dave DuShane, and that oddly enough he seemed to like me. After that experience, Dave stood as pretty much the hero in my eyes.

Still, he was no sort of man for a boy to look up to. He was no shining example to follow. Dave was about as devoid of morals as a man can get. Drunkard, bruiser, gambler, thief; he was all of those. He burned the candle at both ends, fast and hard—until the candle burned out.

It was bound to happen sooner or later, of course, and happen it did, one frosty autumn night Dave DuShane's candle finally burned out. And that brings us to the strange part of this story, the railroading part, and the part that is seared even deeper into my memory than my narrow escape from death on the end of a lariat.

TO DESCRIBE just what happened on that memorable night, and how such a thing could have happened, I must first tell you a few facts about our railroad as it was in those days. The old line was single track, without block signals, and far from being a perfect speedway. East of Wildhorse it ran through a country of broken badlands, and the track had more curves than a boa constrictor with acute convulsions. It was a nasty piece of road, down there in the badlands east of us. Two of the worst train wrecks in the history of our system occurred on that dreaded stretch of rail. There was nothing west on our mountain divisions to equal it for continuous curves, variable grades, restricted visibility, and railroad tangle in general.

The first station east of Wildhorse was Alcorn, beyond the badlands and some twenty miles distant. But there was an intermediate passing track between Wildhorse and Alcorn, laid out right in the heart of the badland wilderness, and its name was Badland. It was a lonely and desolate place, a blind siding without a telegraph office or any means of communication with the outside world. About the only signs of life ever seen at Badland were a few scrawny range cattle of the old Tumbling T ranch, which occasionally wandered up on the track in front of a train and got knocked straight into cow heaven.

Now those are the brief facts. I mention them because they have a direct bearing on what happened that night. Having a picture of the layout, you can better understand the train movements and the events that took place in such a remarkable manner.

ON THE night I speak of, I sat in the Wildhorse depot from about eleven o'clock on. This was most unusual, for I was on day duty at the station and as a rule home in bed by ten. But merely by chance I had a bit of reporting to do. The road had just bought some new passenger locomotives, and one of them was coming through from the east that night on Num-

ber One. It was my idea to watch the first of the new engines rocket through Wildhorse, and then write up a piece about it for our company magazine. Not that I had any journalistic aspirations, but I did want to get my name known on the system. Even at that age I had started to advertise and push, you see, to get somewhere in the business.

So there I sat in the Wildhorse station that night, waiting for the arrival of Number One. She was due past without stop at midnight, but was running rather badly off schedule to the east, so I faced a longer wait than I had expected. However, for companionship I had Dave DuShane, working his regular night shift at the telegraph key. Dave welcomed my company, too, for his job was a dreary drag through the dark hours until dawn.

When midnight passed with no word at all of Number One, Dave called the dispatchers at division headquarters for some information about the delayed flyer. In answer, his telegraph sounder sputtered a long series of metallic dots and dashes, which Dave translated into English for me.

"You might as well go home, lad," he announced. "The DS office says One won't be here before three or four o'clock. That new engine is running some hot pins and boxes. They've had to tie up and rig a keeley line from the tender to water-cool the main driver bearing."

That was disagreeable news. It meant a prolonged wait for me, or else give up and go home to bed. But I was a determined youngster.

"I'll stick around," I decided. "I'm going to get that item for the company magazine if I have to sit here until breakfast time."

Dave only shrugged. "You'll fall asleep," he predicted. "Trying to stay awake all night on this job is a tough proposition. I know!"

HE WAS right about it, too. By one o'clock I could hardly keep my eyes open. Just sitting, that was the worst part of it. There was no sound but the whine of a frosty wind around the little depot, an occasional click of the telegraph sounder, and the deadly ticking of the office clock. Dave sat at his table in the bay window that fronted the track, with a kerosene lamp burning smokily in front of him and a quart bottle of whisky alongside. I was seated back in the gloom by the heating stove, which I industriously stoked

whenever the monotony of sitting idle became unbearable.

Toward two o'clock Dave got up, stretched, walked around the room a few times. Finally he stopped at the stove and glanced in at my fire. In the bright glare from the coals I got a good look at his features. And the sight really startled me.

Dave DuShane looked like—well, like a man whose candle has about burned out. Deep lines of dissipation showed on his face, marring its natural handsomeness. His usually flashing black eyes were dul now, and bloodshot. His thick black hair was tousled, his clothing disheveled, and his muscular shoulders drooped wearily.

"Gosh, Dave," I spoke up. "You look like the last rose of summer. What's the matter with you?"

"Matter? Nothing. Just a little tired is all." He went back to his table, lifted the quart bottle to his lips, then wiped his mouth with the back of his hand. "Been on a drunk for a week, lad. Haven't been

in bed for five days. Yeh, I'm a little fagged out tonight."

I was glad then that I was there with Dave. It was my guess that he was on the verge of keeling over and falling asleep at the switch. I didn't want that to happen. I didn't want him to get into trouble for sleeping on duty—not after the way he had rescued me from the cowboys. I made up my mind to struggle and stay awake from that minute on, if for no other reason than to be sure that Dave stayed awake on his job.

AND stay awake I did, somehow, while the minutes ticked away in tiresome monotony. It was almost three o'clock before we had another report on Number One. By that time my head was nodding and I was groggy with sleepiness. The clicking of the sounder seemed far away, and then Dave's weary voice speaking to me.

"Still awake, lad? Well, you won't have much longer to wait for Number One. She's quit losing time and is making schedule speed now, steadily. The dispatchers have just put out a train order for One to meet Twelve at Alcorn."

Meet Twelve at Alcorn? I roused myself sufficiently to recollect the timetable. Number Twelve was the night limited from the west. She was due through Wildhorse at 3:20 a.m. without stop. Tonight, then, Twelve would get past us and as far east as Alcorn, the next station beyond the badlands, to sidetrack for the delayed crack flyer, Number One. And then One, racing westward through the badlands, would hit us at Wildhorse about four o'clock. Such was the line-up according to the orders that both trains had now received.

Fine and dandy. If it had worked out as planned, all would have been well. But it was destined not to be. Even then, trouble was brewing to the east. For Number One, running four hours late, was beginning to make up some of that lost time. And she was making it up fast.

At exactly 3:05, Dave's sounder began to chatter again. Listening to the message, he perked up with sudden interest. Then he glanced up at the clock on the wall. When he saw the time he frowned, whistled softly, as if puzzled by it.

"There's speed for you!" he barked over his shoulder to me. "Buckhorn Creek just reported Number One by. The BC operator says One's new engine is running like a house afire. They've made up twenty minutes' lost time already."

"Ugh," I grunted drowsily. "That kind of balls up One's meet with Twelve at Alcorn, doesn't it?"

"Sure does," agreed Dave. "It throws that Alcorn meet all out of kilter. At this rate, One will reach Alcorn by three-twenty, the same time Twelve is due here at Wildhorse. The dispatchers will have to change the meeting point, move it this way from Alcorn."

"Uh-huh. But where to?"

"To Badland, lad. You know, that God-forsaken siding in the rough country between here and Alcorn. It's a perfect meet for Badland now, since One will reach Alcorn so much earlier than expected. The dispatchers will shift that meet, you watch and see."

AS A matter of fact, I was too sleepy to give a hang where the two trains met. But I kept up the discussion, just to help me stay awake.

"Then there'll be an annulment of orders?" I asked.

"Bound to be," said Dave. "Both trains have orders to meet at Alcorn. Those will be cancelled and new ones issued, changing the meet to Badland. Number One will pick up the new order at Alcorn at three-twenty. Number Twelve will get the new order here at Wildhorse, from me, at three-twenty. And then Twelve will take the siding at Badland to clear for One instead of running on to Alcorn for the meet."

Dave was gabbing away for about the same reason I was—trying to clear his weary and muddled senses. He got up and began to pace the floor of the tiny lamp-lit

office again, striking his hands together impatiently. This new development in train movements had caused him to become strained and nervous. He would be called on to handle the new order for Number Twelve, and there was little leeway in the matter of time. The dirty-faced clock on the wall registered 3:10 now.

"If the dispatchers aim to change that meet," I muttered, "they'd better hurry up and put out the new order for it. Number Twelve is due here in ten minutes."

"And she's reported right on the dot," added Dave. He stepped to the bay window and peered out into the night. "Yeh, the first glow of her headlight is showing in the west already. What in the devil can be slowing things up at headquarters?"

With an impatient oath, he broke open his telegraph instrument and called the division dispatchers. Their answer was for Dave to keep his shirt on, and it sent him into a tantrum. He grabbed up the whisky bottle from his table, took another stiff shot out of it, and began to stride around the office like a caged animal.

And then a thought struck me—the order board, the semaphore signal above the roof of the station. Its red light would have to be turned on, if Number Twelve was to be stopped and a new order delivered. At the moment, the order signal was dark, for the rules required that no train be stopped at Wildhorse unless the operator actually held a train order to deliver to it.

"Say, Dave," I broke in. "Hadn't you better play safe and turn on your red light? You don't want Twelve to get away from you."

"Play safe, hell!" swore Dave. "I'm not allowed to display my red light without an order to deliver. That's regulation. And I haven't got an order to deliver to Twelve because those fumble-fingered dispatchers haven't issued it yet. 'Keep your shirt on,' he says—the dirty son of a——"

AND Dave cursed the dispatchers for their delay; cursed them with such bitter hard blasphemy that it ran shivers up my spine and reminded me again of what I sometimes forgot—that Dave DuShane was an utterly godless brute, an unprincipled ruffian of the first water.

It was 3:15 now, and still nothing from the dispatchers. The west pane of the bay window was becoming frosted with the increasing glow of Twelve's headlight. I could hear the low rumble of the train in the distance. Still cursing, Dave flung open the door of the heating stove and began to poke up the fire with furious impatience.

Then suddenly his telegraph sounder broke with a wild burst of stuttering. He jumped for the instrument, jumped quickly and anxiously, leaving the stove poker sticking in the hot coals in his haste. I was sitting right there beside the stove, but I was too drugged with drowsiness to notice the forgotten poker, or care.

After a moment at the key, Dave spoke aloud, but as much to himself as to me.

And his voice sounded strained and hoarse, thick in tone.

"Here it is at last!" he said. "The superseding order for Twelve. Number Twelve will hold for Number One at Badland instead of Alcorn. And it took those brainless dispatchers ten minutes to figure out a simple meet that an idiot could have arranged in ten seconds!"

The rumble of Twelve was growing louder now, and the light on the west window brighter. It was just 3:18. Two minutes were left in which to stop Twelve for its new order.

Dave promptly got up from his chair to turn on the red light of the order board

overhead. His hand reached forward toward the signal lever, set close beside the window. And in that very instant, Dave DuShane's waning candle gave its last flicker and burned out.

Rising hurriedly and clumsily, he had knocked his chair over backwards on the floor. With his hand halfway to the signal lever, he paused and turned around to see what had caused the racket. When he saw the overturned chair, he blinked at it, muttered an oath, and stooped over to pick it up. The interruption was fatal.

I WATCHED him, watched him every second; yet I saw him only dimly as in a dream, for my eyelids were leaden and half closed. For a moment he stood there leaning heavily on the back of his righted chair. He seemed to sway unsteadily on his feet, and to be clutching at support. Then abruptly he straightened erect, lifted his hands to his haggard face, and pressed his palms against his bloodshot eyes.

"Now let me see," he croaked dazedly. "What was I doing? What was I do—Oh, yes, I remember. The stove poker. Left it in the fire. Damn it to hell, I thought I was sober, but I must be drunk!"

He came over and pulled the poker out of the coals. It was red hot to the handle. He dropped it quickly on the zinc ash pan. Even that noise failed to disturb my sleepy stupor. Neither did the long station whistle of an approaching locomotive bring me to my senses. I was in a worse daze than Dave, or just as bad.

From the stove he staggered back to his chair and half fell into it. Why, I wondered vaguely, did he sit down? Shouldn't he have reached forward to turn on—to turn on what? My brain was so fogged that it refused to function at all.

"Twelve's almost here," came Dave's babbled words. "Can't make a mistake about this new order for her. Let's see if I've got it written right. Number Twelve will hold for Number One at Badland instead of Alcorn. Twelve will hold for One at Badland instead of Alcorn."

And so help me, I fell dead asleep.

I was awakened almost instantly. I was being shaken; shaken gently, but from head to foot. The chair I sat in shook, the whole depot shook. I jerked erect, looked around, wide-eyed and startled.

Through the bay window I caught a glimpse of movement, of speed. Dull varnish and glass was streaking by, followed by the flash of a red-and-green tail light. Then the shrill shriek of a locomotive whistle faded quickly to a long wail in the distance.

What train was that, so swiftly past? My brain was numb. I looked at the clock. 3:20. Why, that was Number Twelve, of course, right on the dot. But——

Shouldn't Twelve have stopped? To pick up a train order?

I looked quickly at Dave. And my heart turned a flip-flop. He was standing in the center of the room, standing frozen and speechless. His mouth hung open, his eyes bulged. In his hand was clutched a green order tissue.

"Dave! What is it? What happened?"

BUT I knew what had happened. I knew it even before I looked at the signal lever and saw it set the wrong way. Dave DuShane had forgotten to turn on his red order light!

It stunned me. Twelve gone, without that change of orders! I tried to think what would result. Certainly, Twelve would fail to take the siding at Badland now. She would run on to Alcorn for the old meet. And Number One, receiving the new order at Alcorn, would start at once for Badland, expecting a clear track all the way through. The two flyers had, in effect, lap orders. There would be a head-on collision between them.

"Dave!" I cried, leaping to my feet. "Stop Number One! Get Alcorn on the wire and stop One there—quick!"

The telegraph sounder had started to click again. Dave nodded toward it, dumbly, hopelessly. I knew no Morse, but I knew what Dave meant by that mute

nod. Alcorn was reporting Number One out, gone. Gone at 3:20 as expected, after receiving the new order saying that Twelve would be clear on the Badland siding.

My scalp prickled at the thought. It was too late now to stop that collision. There was no way left to warn either train. Only the badlands lay between them, and there was no living thing in the badlands except a few stray Tumbling T cows. Two trainloads of people, of peacefully sleeping passengers, were doomed to crash together between Badland siding and Alcorn. They would head-end at full speed on the blind curves of that dreaded country, already the scene of two major railroad disasters, and now about to witness a third and even worse catastrophe.

DESPERATELY I began to grope in my mind for some ray of hope, however slight. But it was useless, for there was no hope. It was just impossible for the coming collision to be avoided. Nothing could stop it, not even the warning of headlight beams. No engineer could see an approaching headlight in those broken badlands in time to do more than slap at his brake valve and jump for the rocks. Hopeless!

I know my own feelings then. But what were the feelings of Dave DuShane, whose mistake had caused this tragedy? The crumpled and useless train order dropped from his fingers and fluttered to the floor. He staggered back to his table, reached for the half-empty whisky bottle, started to lift it to his lips. Then suddenly his arm whipped back, and he hurled the bottle away from him, violently. It smashed through a pane of the bay window, and itself was shattered on the depot platform outside. Then Dave dropped heavily into his chair, slumped over in it, and buried his face in his hands, shuddering.

With a great effort I began to collect my wits. "Listen, Dave," I quavered, walking over to him. "Hadn't you better tell headquarters? Yes, that's the thing to do. Call the dispatchers. Tell them what's happened, what is going to happen in a few minutes. Tell them to rush relief, an ambulance train, doctors, nurses, the wrecking crew. Hurry and get busy on your key!"

For a long moment he remained huddled and motionless. Then slowly his face came up out of his hands, white and old. Slowly he turned to his instrument and called the division dispatchers.

They answered promptly. And then, with his finger on the key, Dave's lips moved mechanically with the words he tapped over the wire to headquarters.

"Wildhorse. No. 12, out, 3:20 a.m."

Just that. No more. A regular report of train passage.

I was thunderstruck. I stood and gaped at him. It was several seconds before speech returned to me. Then it came in a rush.

"Man alive, Dave!" I burst out. "Why didn't you tell them the truth? Get help started down to those poor people! Heaven knows they'll need it soon enough! What's got into you, anyway?"

HE MADE no answer. I doubt if he even heard me. He got to his feet and stood silent and grim, staring vacantly into space. Slowly his fingers crept up the sides of his head and knotted in his heavy black hair. Then suddenly he turned and strode across the office to the door of the depot baggage room. Jerking it open, he stepped through into the pitch darkness beyond. The door banged closed behind him, and I heard the key click in the lock.

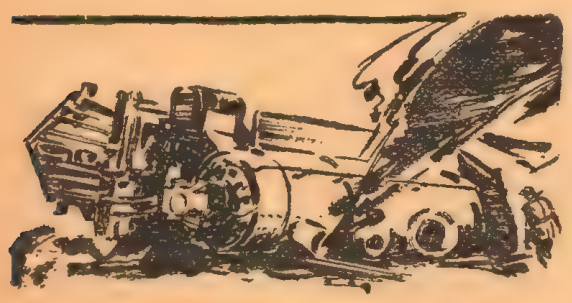
I could only gaze blankly after him. His actions had left me flabbergasted. Why had he locked himself in the dark baggage room? Why did he refuse to tell headquarters what had happened? Had the shock of the coming disaster unbalanced his mind?

My thoughts were in a turmoil. I went to the baggage door and pounded on it, calling for Dave to come out and notify the dispatchers. But there was no answer, no sound, within. I beat on the door until

my fists were bruised and bleeding, then went back to my chair beside the stove and dropped down in it exhausted.

It was 3:30 now. Number Twelve was due at Badland already, making the short run from Wildhorse at high speed. At that very moment Twelve probably was rocketing past the Badland siding on her way to doom. As nearly as I could figure it, her collision with Number One would come just four minutes later—at 3:34.

My eyes riveted on the office clock with horrible fascination. I counted in anguish every second of those next terrible min-



utes. 3:31, 3:32, 3:33. And then—3:34! I could hear the echo of that frightful crash in the badlands. But, no; it was only my frazzled nerves. The sound I heard was the door of the baggage room being unlocked and opened. Looking up, I saw Dave standing on the threshold.

"My God!" I said. "I thought I heard — Dave, are you going to tell the dispatchers?"

"There's no need of it." He stood there quietly, his tone strangely calm and assured. "You're overwrought about this, lad. Don't take it so hard. Everything will be all right."

"Be all right?" I echoed. "Two passenger trains collide in the badlands, and you say everything will be all right?"

HE CAME over and put his hand on my shoulder. And there was not a tremble to his fingers, I noticed. This was not the same man who had entered that baggage room, stunned and horror-stricken, ten minutes earlier.

"Stop your worrying, lad," he said. "Those two trains didn't collide. There hasn't been any wreck at all."

At that, I went limp all over. No wreck? How had it been avoided? Had I overlooked some ray of hope? And what did Dave know about it?

"Why do you say that?" I asked weakly. "How do you know there hasn't been a wreck?"

Dave turned away, walked back to his table in the window, sat down. Reaching forward, he turned down the wick of the smoky lamp. The yellow flame shrank, leaving the room in semidarkness. Then he answered my question.

"Because I prayed! There hasn't been a wreck, because I prayed that there shouldn't be one!"

The words chilled my blood. So the shock of horror had affected Dave's mind, after all. The man was mad. It would have been funny if it hadn't been so tragic. Not really prayed! Not Dave DuShane, of all men!

"You know, lad," he went on, rationally enough, "I've always been a pretty godless sort. You know my reputation—booze-hound, barroom bully, company thief. I've never said a prayer in my life. But I prayed just now. I went in that baggage room and prayed my heart out. Whatever I've been or done, I don't go in for killing innocent people in droves. I don't want my hands stained with the blood of those helpless passengers. A thing like this will break any man, if he's human at all."

THERE was no doubting his sincerity. I could tell by the tone of his voice that he meant every word of it. But Dave's personal reaction was beside the point, which was a cold matter of a major railroad disaster miles away.

"I don't blame you for praying," I said. "I'd have done the same thing. But this is practical railroad operation. You should have called headquarters for help immediately. Surely you can't believe a prayer

has stopped that collision from taking place."

"Yes, I believe just that," declared Dave.

"But why? It's so ridiculous!"

"No, it isn't ridiculous, lad. You see, I had an answer to my prayer. While I was kneeling in the baggage room, just a few moments before the collision was due, I had an answer. Not an answer in words, or a vision of angels, or any of that silly stuff; but an answer, just the same. I felt it, somehow. The collision did not take place."

"Then what happened to stop it?"

"I don't know, lad. I haven't the faintest idea of what happened. But I'm certain there has been no wreck. Everything will be all right. I prayed, and received an answer."

Well, that was the last straw. "Prayed and received an answer!" It was just too much to believe. I was convinced then that Dave DuShane had lost his mind. His brain had cracked under the blow of tragedy. I could think of no other explanation for it. As for imploring him any longer to notify the dispatchers, that was clearly useless.

BY NOW it was nearing four o'clock. If the two trains had passed safely at Badland, as Dave seemed to think, it was now time for Number One to have arrived here at Wildhorse. But One was not here. Neither was there any glow of headlight in the eastern sky.

Soon the telegraph sounder began to click and sputter again. Headquarters was calling. Dave responded, sent reply. This conversing was repeated several times. At length Dave pulled out the plugs and cut his instruments off the wire circuit, leaving us in silence.

"The dispatchers are up in the air," he remarked. "They keep asking why Number One hasn't arrived here yet from Badland, and why Number Twelve hasn't reached Alcorn. I've told them there's some kind of delay at Badland, but nothing serious. There's no use for me to keep repeating it, so I'll go dead-wire until I learn what's happened."

Then we sat there, just sat there, listening to the clock tick away the dreadful minutes. If I had hoped against hope earlier, I gave it up now, for it was after four o'clock and still no sign of Number One. Of course, it had been hopeless from the first. Two trainloads of people had been slaughtered, Dave DuShane was crazy, and that's all there was to it.

The minutes passed, somehow. Ten of them, twenty, thirty, forty. A full hour dragged by. Still we sat there in the gloom. I felt too weak to move off my chair. I could only hold my head in my hands and try to blot out the nightmarish visions—visions of scores of humans mangled and dying in the badlands, with no aid coming to them, their plight unknown to anyone except a helpless kid and an insane operator.

THEN suddenly I heard a word, one word, spoken by Dave.

"Smoke!"

I looked up, and through the bay window saw a strange dull light outside. Then I realized that daylight was breaking. The clock said 5:10 now. A sad gray twilight hung over the prairies, and frost was white on the sagebrush.

Smoke? I jumped up and over to Dave's window. I peered eastward down the track, eastward toward the badlands. Dawn was a blood-red streak on the ragged horizon. And against the crimson, darkly, there showed a little black smudge, like the smoke of a locomotive in the distance.

A locomotive? Coming out of the badlands? What could it be? Not Number One, surely! That was impossible, now. I left Dave sitting at his table and dashed outside to the track.

Standing there on the depot platform, I squinted my eyes against the growing dawn. Yes, it was an engine coming. And coming like a bat out of hell. She was raising a white cloud of alkali dust to mingle with her black smoke.

Then I saw it, nearer. A passenger locomotive. But a strange one, an engine I'd never seen on our road before. What the devil! Were my eyes deceiving me? Or had I gone crazy like Dave?

No, it was real. A strange engine running toward me like mad. And behind it, now, a long gray line of dust-coated sleeping cars. Good God!—could that be Number One and her brand-new locomotive approaching? I'd never write this report for our company magazine; the story was too big for me to handle.

Now a whistle shrieked. An engineer's goggled head poked out of the cab window. A gauntleted arm waved me back away from the track. Then a blast of wind almost bowled me over. There was a rush and a roar, pounding of wheels, screech of flanges, flash of smoking trucks. Dust choked me, gravel peppered me. And Number One was past like a shot, more than five hours late now and really burning the steel.

I BURST back into the station, laughing aloud. I must have been a little hysterical.

"Dave!" I yelled. "Did you see that? Did you see it?"

"Yes," said Dave simply. "It was Number One."

"But how did it happen? How could it ever have happened?"

"I still don't know, lad." He shook his head gravely. "I still haven't the slightest idea of what happened. It was the answer to my prayer. That's all I can say."

But we soon found out what had happened. Dave plugged in his instrument again, and almost at once got the information off the wire. Number Twelve had just been flagged down at Alcorn for her crew to explain to the dispatchers what had caused the long delay at Badland. And this is what had occurred, as Twelve's conductor told it:

Number Twelve, having only the old train order calling for a meet with Number One at Alcorn, had of course run past Badland instead of sidetracking there. But on the first curve beyond Badland, Twelve's engine had hit a steer—one of those confounded Tumbling T cattle that were always wandering up on the track in the badlands and getting knocked into cow heaven. Instead of getting boosted over the telegraph wires as usual, however, this animal went down under the engine wheels. And one of its large leg bones derailed the pony wheels of Twelve's locomotive.

Naturally, the engineman made an emergency stop. Then, according to safety regulations, the train crew piled out to flag the track in both directions from the disabled flyer. The head brakeman strolled a few hundred feet up the rails eastward, and to his utter astonishment, suddenly saw Number One's headlight come zooming around a curve ahead of him. At once the brakeman broke out a red flare, and Number One, spotting the desperate signal, just managed to stop pilot to pilot with the derailed engine of Number Twelve.

Afterward, it had taken an hour or so to rerail those pony wheels. And then Twelve had reversed and backed into the Badland siding, trembling and thankful, after comparing orders with One.

I LEANED feebly against the table and looked at Dave taking the story off the sounder.

"Well, can you beat that?" I exclaimed weakly. "A cow derailing a train! Why, such a thing wouldn't happen once in a thousand times. And yet it happened this time, at the exact moment when it was needed. What a lucky accident that was!"

"Only," said Dave quietly, "it wasn't an accident. It was—it was sent."

Well, was it? Had it been just a queer twist of chance that saved those trains? Or was it what Dave DuShane so deeply believed—a practical demonstration of the power of prayer? Freak accident or divine miracle, I do not know. Your guess is as good as mine.

Whichever it was, Dave was through now. His job was gone. For failing to deliver a train order he would be discharged, blacklisted, run out of the game for life. You could get away with a lot of things on the railroads in those days—boozing, fighting, even stealing the company cash; but you couldn't get away with one bad operating mistake. Oh, no; Dave DuShane was done. As a railroad telegrapher he was washed up, forever and a day.

"But there's a way to beat the blacklist," I reminded him, trying not to be too downhearted about it. "You can go somewhere else and work under a false name. Plenty of other railroaders have done it. Wherever you go, Dave, I'll go with you."

"No, lad." He got up and put his arm around my shoulders. "You stay here and —and push. Don't be a fool like I've been. There's a new generation of railroad men coming, and they won't be drunken toughs like me and a lot of the others. Make yourself one of those new men, lad. Who knows, you might even push yourself up to be president of this system some day."

"But you, Dave. What's to become of you, now?"

"Just this." He bent to his instrument, called headquarters, and told the dispatchers to send a new telegrapher to Wildhorse to replace Operator DuShane, resigned. "I've got another job in mind," he added. "A better job than this. It just occurred to me. I'm going to— Hold on, lad! What's wrong?"

HE SAW me fall back against the wall, suddenly stunned. I thought I'd had my share of shocks that night, but here was another, perhaps the greatest shock of all.

"Your hair, Dave!" I gasped. "It's—why, it's——"

Words failed me. I hadn't noticed it before, because the light in the office had been dim and I'd been too upset to notice much of anything. But now, with the first rays of the rising sun striking through the window full on Dave, I saw that astounding sight. Dave's hair, his thick mop of coal-black hair, had turned white!

Of course, I'd read of people's hair suddenly turning gray or white under the stress of some great emotional upheaval. But I'd always taken such yarns with a grain of salt. At least I never expected to witness such a phenomenon. Yet here it was before my eyes. Sometime between the passage of Number Twelve and the arrival of Number One—perhaps while he was in the baggage room learning to pray —Dave DuShane's hair had turned as white as a ball of cotton. That capped the climax of a series of events which, as I said at the beginning, formed the strangest experience I have ever encountered in a lifetime of railroad service.

All this, to repeat, took place a long while ago. Railroading has changed a lot since then, and the men have changed even more than the business. Only Wildhorse remains the same, a jerkwater cow country town. Still, it has a church now, and the church stands on a corner that used to be the site of the largest saloon in the county. So even Wildhorse has changed some, too, since those days.

And now, my friend, I am afraid I'm overdue for an appointment with my board of directors. But before I excuse myself there is one more thing I'd like to say. If you should ever visit Wildhorse and attend Sunday service at the church I mentioned, I want you to take a good look at the preacher. You'll find him to be an old man, but for all his advanced age, still tall and powerful and handsome, with flashing black eyes and a great mop of snowy white hair. And if you should ask the old-timers in the congregation whether their pastor is a good man, a godly man, worthy to hold a pulpit, the old-timers will tell you this:

That the Rev. Mr. David DuShane hasn't touched liquor or uttered a single cuss word since a certain night, many long years ago, when his hair turned white between the passage of two trains and he quit a railroad job to join the clergy.

THE

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FLOJO

By S. OMAR BARKER

Author of "Forty Ways," "The No-Game Hunter," etc.

THE man drowsing beside the dying coals stirred with a movement that was at once lazy and alert. He propped himself up on a bony elbow and removed his pipe from between snaggy teeth. A man seemed to hear better with his teeth unclamped; and out yonder in the blackness, somewhere, the night was talking. Not with words. Faintly thus far, and softly, in a vague, thuddy undertone; hoofs, too heavy, too far away to be the thumping about of his own browsing burros, yet steadily coming nearer.

The listener got up and squatted on his heels by the fire. He reached out a tatter-sleeved arm and set the sooty coffee pot on the coals. From a grimy, nearly empty meal sack he fisted out some coarse coffee. He sifted a little sparingly into the pot. That last grubstake had been grudgingly given and scant. Getting low, it was.

Where would the next be coming from? From the newly elected sheriff, perhaps? "Sheriff John W. Rutland"—it sounded mighty strange, somehow, to say it. Johnny could afford to grubstake him now, with the new job. He had a softish gizzard in him too, Johnny—maybe to match his spine. But never mind that. These Borrado County folks didn't seem to know about that—yet. They had voted for him, hadn't they?"

"An honest man, young, upright, energetic, respectable—for our sheriff!"

What the hell did they expect of a sheriff? What the hell did Johnny Rutland think a sheriff had to do—teach Sunday School?

He dipped water from a battered bucket with a big tin can, paused a second with it in one hand and his pipe in the other while he harkened again to the talking night, then swigged generously from it and poured the rest into the already steaming coffee pot. That would make a couple of cups apiece for them, whoever they were, if they were headed this way and decided to stop. Two of 'em it sounded like.

The spill-over from his drinking dribbled down unwiped through bristly chin whiskers that daylight—and a good washing—would have showed to be iron gray.

THE two riders did not come directly into the wide flicker of the new firelight the shabby prospector had kindled for their welcome. He could hear the gusty

blowing of their hard pushed horses as they circled it in the dark, looking him over. When they did appear, it was on foot, right hands swinging free close to their gun laden holsters, bandanna masks across their faces, up to their eyes. Nor had they stopped by for coffee. They stood at the edge of the firelight.

"Seen you was still up," said the shorter, chunky one of them. "You know these hills, I take it. Which one of these draws must a man foller to hit what they call the Paso Borrado?"

The man at the fire squinted at them without rising.

"The Borrado? You aimin' to cross the Range, I'll tell you a shorter way, an' better travelin'. It's——"

"Skip it!" The taller man's tone was at once casual and tense like a very tight wire touched with a glove. "It's that Paso place we want to get to. Whichaway?"

"Follered?" A grin split through the squatting man's whiskers.

The first speaker's "kahoom" seemed only partly for throat clearing purposes.

"Y'see we got word to carry—life an' death message you might say—for some fellers supposed to be camped in the Paso Borrado meadows—huntin' party. So natcherly we like to make it up there tonight if we can. You jest tell us——"

"I see. There's the coffee pot, boys. She's hot. Grab you a pair of them cups. It'll do you good. I've rode by night on a whipped horse myself an' I know." He paused, took out his pipe, cocked his head, listening. "Nobody comin'. Not close anyways. You can take time for a swig. That Paso Borrado—it's quite a fort to fight off a posse from, but you're a right smart piece off the way to come at it by starlight. I'll give you directions, best I can, while you tank up a little. You cain't drink with them bandanners on. My fire won't hardly sunburn you."

THE shorter man took a cup. The other stood, still a little rigid, uncertain.

"You come along to guide us," he said.

"Me? Nope, mister. But don't get huffy about it. I wouldn't go no quicker for a sheriff, either. No hand to meddle with such, on either side." He paused to pour himself a cup. "What was it, boys, just a hold-up, or a killin'?"

The tall man slapped leather suddenly. His gun stood out in his hand.

"The last man that felt too urgent about askin' questions," he said in a cold, hard tone, "got his answer from this."

The whiskered man's expression did not change. His tone was the same lazy drawl, but there was a subtle hardness underlying it, too. He nodded toward his bedroll almost within arm's reach of where he squatted, teetering a little on worn bootheels.

"I got one of them things right there handy, myself," he said. "You can't drink coffee in my camp with a gun in your hand cowboy."

"Put it away, Buck!" The chunky man spoke sharply over his coffee cup. "Don't be a damn fool. Git you some coffee. This ol' feller ain't goin' to hurt nobody."

"Not unless I have to. Sorry I can't offer you no sugar, boys. Or a lunch to take along."

"We got plenty supplies."

The tall man holstered his gun. He took off his mask, squatted and gulped blistery coffee. The first swallow seemed to put him in a good humor.

When, after giving them directions for finding Paso Borrado (The Rubbed-Out Pass), their host still reckoned they would mighty likely miss it in the dark, it was he who laughed. It was a hard laugh, full of confidence—and some contempt.

"What the hell if we don't find it? From what I hear, ain't tomorrow this new sheriff's day to teach Sunday School? You know him Mister—Mister—dogged if I can call your name, *viejito!*"

"Prob'ly not," said the whiskered one dryly, "since I ain't mentioned it. I don't —very often. But I've got a right good nickname if you want to hear it. It's

Flojo, only you say it 'Floho.' Maybe you know what it means."

The tall man nodded, turning away his lean, hardbitten face lest his host perceive its faint expression of contempt. But the other visitor showed he didn't savvy.

"'Flojo'—it's a Mexican word for 'lazy,' 'shiftless,' 'plumb no 'count,' in fact. Kind of a name that don't call for no last

name to go with it—like if you called a killer 'Pot-Shot'. It tells the story. Have some more coffee. I didn't catch your names, either, gents."

"Nor won't," said the tall man dryly. "Man rides so fast sometimes, his name can't keep up with him."

"Shut up, Buck," said the squatty man, rising. "You talk too damn much. Let's git goin'. Thanks for the coffee."

"You don't owe me for it," said Flojo, knocking out his pipe. "I'd do as much for a dog—or a sheriff."

The two men backed out of the firelight.

"Reckon we don't need to tell you," said the tall one, "anybody comes askin', you ain't seen nobody."

"I don't lie unless I have to," Flojo spat untidily into the fire. "But I'm kinder absent-minded sometimes about time and direction. Maybe I seen you yesterday, headin' the other way. Go like I said an' you'll git to the Paso. It ain't the easiest way, but anybody on your trail may figger you're headin' acrost the Range instead. So long."

FOR quite a while the night talked back to him the sounds of their going. But for the hour or more that he squatted all but motionless beside the dying fire there came to him from the trail of their coming, nothing but silence. That was as he expected. He didn't figure Sheriff Johnny Rutland as much of a hand to crowd the danger trail at night. "A young man, honest, upright—" Sheriff John W. Rutland, at twenty-five!

"An' me past forty in my sock feet, already an' old man, pack-rattin' with a couple of moth-et jackasses, beggin' grubstakes. *Flojo! Muy* damned *flojo!* But I never ducked tail from a fight!"

IT WAS well past sun-up when the sheriff came. The gun that he wore, and its leather, were new. Two older men, with older guns, rode with him.

"Coffee?" said Flojo by way of greeting. He waved a hand in the general direction of the steaming pot without rising from his heels.

"No thanks." Johnny Rutland shook his head. There were tight-set muscles under the smooth, brown skin of his roundish face—grimness of a sort, consciously determined. But his eyes could not be still. Blue and clear and clean they were, yet ridden by some uneasiness that kept them continually casting about—not searchingly, Flojo thought. More like the look of cornered wild animals he had seen, seeking where to run.

Flojo's quick appraisal could not miss the contrast; the two posse-men's weathered faces were relaxed, at ease. They grinned in greeting, but not with their eyes. Grimness of a different sort was master there—a wonted grimness of which they were consciously unaware, cold, quiet, steady. They seemed neither unduly hurried nor uneasy.

"Better light down for coffee, Sheriff," said one of them, respectfully for all that he was well nigh twice the sheriff's age. "Nothin' to gain from rushin' now. They're headed for Paso Borrado, I figger. It's a wolf's nest, an' they've got some more waitin' there to help 'em. If they decide to hole up there an' make a fight,

they'll still be there when we come. If they don't, they've done got too big a lead to ketch up with in this county, anyhow. Come grab you a cup."

He held out his own with one hand and poured with the other, addressing Flojo in a lower tone across the steam:

"It's Johnny's first man-chase, I reckon. He's a mite too anxious to git to the fightin'. In time you learn to take it easier—and steadier."

Flojo squinted impersonally at the young sheriff, then gazed at the coffee pot, batting his eyes.

"Yeah," he grunted. "Always was thataway even when he was a kid, Mac. Used to worry me some, times I was around him, tryin' to keep Johnny outa fights on account of it. But——" he spoke now as impersonally as if Sheriff Johnny Rutland were astraddle of the moon instead of standing there across the fire in front of him—"but he's a growed man, now—an' a sheriff. It's him for it. Coffee, Sheriff? Sorry I cain't offer you no sugar. I done quit usin' it, myself."

SHERIFF JOHNNY RUTLAND held out his cup in silence. If it shook a little nobody but the ragged prospector saw it. He had stood up now, and his body bulked between the posse-men and their youthful chief.

"By the way, Mac," Flojo turned again, squatting on his heels, "who the hell you think you're houndin' after this time, anyhow? Or is this jest a practice run for the new sheriff?" He winked a little insolently.

It was Johnny Rutland who answered, a flush of anger reddening the smooth tan of his cheeks, a strong flavor of bitterness in his voice. He pointed to the clear-cut tracks of boots leading away from the fire, clear patterned prints of boots too new, too trim for Flojo's own.

"You ask us that? You squat there like an uncombed ape and ask us who we're after, when the tracks read plain as day that you've harbored them here yourself? Men wanted by the law for robbery and murder—the cold-blooded murder of honest men whose only offense was too much courage in trying to defend the property of their employers? You ask that when you've talked with them, fed them an' given them directions, I don't doubt, how best to escape?"

Suddenly Johnny Rutland flung down the battered tin coffee cup as if it contained poison. Contempt, and a stronger bitterness of emotion than mere contempt, choked up in his throat.

"Hell, what else could we expect from —*'El Flojo'*—McHenry! Kelso! Let's go!"

The young sheriff whirled and strode toward his horse.

The snaggy teeth hidden behind Flojo's unkempt whiskers bit hard on the pipe stem between them. Outwardly his expression of lazy unconcern did not change. He teetered a little on his heels. He spoke in a voice that despite its flat, expressionless tone, was loud enough to carry clearly to Sheriff Rutland's ears.

"Makes right smart of a speech, don't he?" he said. "Well Mac, an' you Mister Kelso, I'll make you one myself: when a man lights down at my camp I don't ask him no pedigree nor pry into his business. But since he's frettin' so about it, you can tell Sheriff Rutland for me that my—er—guests last night was Wild Buck Tompkins an' Pot-Shot Lumbaugh. I could jest as easy let you waste your time tryin' to track 'em out or bustin' off up to Paso Borrado where you figger they'll be holed up with Blondy Dutch an' some others to stand you off, because it ain't none of my business what you do, but I'm goin' to tell you. You'll find that wolf's nest empty. Wild Buck an' the whole bunch have done gone yonder, plumb acrost the Range. By now they're out to the Tusa Flats an' ridin' fast. How do I know? Because they got me to show 'em the short way acrost, myownself, late yesterday evenin'. Best thing you can do is git back to town, pronto, an' wire the word to Sheriff Donegal over

in Tusa County if you want them hombres caught. Like it or not, that's the way it is, gents!"

"By God, we ought to take you in for that!" Kelso spoke sharply as the two put down their empty cups. "If it wasn't for——"

"Don't let that stop you," Flojo broke in with a shrug. "My grubstake's about petered out, anyhow. Jail just wouldn't be no hardship for a while."

THE two deputies looked at the young sheriff, already swinging into the saddle, then back at the squatting figure hunched beside the fire. For an instant they hesitated. One of them swore softly under his breath. Then, with neither thanks for the coffee nor any further comment, they went to their horses.

Out of Flojo's hearing McHenry spoke in a low tone.

"You heard what he said, Johnny?"

Sheriff Rutland nodded. His lips tightened. He spoke a little unsteadily.

"He's lying," he said.

"Lying? But why? We know he's—he's purty much of a no'count ol' pack-rat, Johnny, but you surely don't figger he'd be in cahoots with an outfit like Wild Buck's?"

"No," said Johnny Rutland. "Ride on a minute, will you? I want to talk to him myself."

"Right," said McHenry soberly, "but be careful, Johnny."

The man whom the Mexicans had named Flojo did not rise from his heel squat when Sheriff Rutland rode again in front of him. He did not look up, even when the other spoke.

"Look here," said the boy with the star, "you didn't have to do that, Tom."

"Do what?"

"Don't stall. I know you think I'm a coward, but——"

"But you've got on a star now, eh, an' two good men an' true to do your fightin' for you—is that it, *Sheriff* Rutland?"

But Johnny Rutland was looking now at the other's meager, battered camp equipment, the thinness of his grub-sacks. Flojo saw the look and he broke in abruptly when the other started to speak again.

"I know what you're thinkin'," he said curtly. "Forget it. I pick out my own trails an' I foller 'em. If it looks like a hell of a life to you, jest recollect that there ain't no bluff about it, anyhow."

"Bluff? You think wearin' the star ain't going to mean anything to me? You think——"

"Bluff," said Flojo flatly. "Wearin' a star ain't goin' to give you guts. You fergot the time you let my horse run away with you—in the right direction, o' course—an' left me afoot with five cattridges an' as many men a-shootin' at me? Yeah, I know you was runnin' fer help, but I didn't need it. Them rustlers knowed I'd seen 'em on a job an' could testify to it, an' they thought they knowed they could shut my mouth permanent with a carcass-full of lead. Who was it fooled 'em, you with the help you didn't get, or me stayin' to fight? How the hell was they to know I wasn't the tattlin' kind? I don't owe the law nothin', an' I never did. But I never ducked tail frum a fight, neither. Ain't I got a limp I wouldn't never have had if you hadn't got the white-livered shakes too bad to shoot, that time over in the Valley? I have—but it ain't in the guts. Nossir, Johnny, you ain't never stood up to the taw-line on a fight deal yet, an' wearin' a star ain't goin' to change you! 'Sheriff Rutland—the Honorable Sheriff Rutland'—why, you'll be the laughin' stock an' sneerin' post of ever' he-man in Borrado County, includin' them that voted you in, before a month is out. It ain't honesty nor respectability that makes a sheriff in this country, Johnny. It's a ramrod up your back an' iron in your middlin's when the shootin' starts. Been a damn sight better for you if I'd spread what I know about your innards long ago, 'stead of them findin' it out on you now an' rippin' that star off of you—with their tongues, if not actual. Now take my advice an' git to hell on back

to town. You ain't fit posse company fer hombres like McHenry an' Kelso, even if they don't know it—yet."

Throughout the long speech Flojo teetered on his heels, biting his pipe, keeping his voice down, holding himself in check, looking up not even once. And so he remained a while when Sheriff Johnny Rutland turned his horse in silence and rode away to join his deputies.

Listening to the hoof sounds of their going, he realized all at once that they were not heading back toward town, nor across the Range. The hoof-talk told him that they were crossing Cabrita Ridge into the maze of rocky, timbered canyons that spread-fingered down from the high, boulder-blocked pass, with its spring-watered meadow pockets, known as Paso Borrado.

He visioned the scene that would be enacted if they should decide to tackle that wolf's nest in the Paso—and find the wolves at home.

Killed? The burro-man called Flojo was not thinking merely of death, either for McHenry or Kelso or Johnny Rutland. No man could live forever. What he was seeing was a picture of Sheriff Johnny Rutland's face, yellow with fear; Johnny Rutland finding some pretext for staying to safe cover himself, maybe even running away, failing in the pinch, while Mac and Kelso advanced to take it as it came.

He had seen them look at their new young chief with affection, with some indulgence, maybe, for his youth, but with respect. How would it be when the steady gaze of these men, and all men like them, could look upon Johnny Rutland with nothing but contempt? To a degree he knew already, from experience; but the contempt of men under which he had acquired his own well deserved nickname had not been born of cowardice.

With a sound like a growl in his throat Flojo got up from the fireside. Cursing himself steadily the while, he buckled on his thong-patched gun-belt. From the disorderly tool stack against a tree he took a battered .30-.30 carbine. The slight limp in his left leg did not perceptibly shorten his stride as he struck the steep, rocky ridge behind his camp and began climbing.

TWO hours later the echoing sound of shots brought Sheriff Rutland and his two deputies to a sudden halt. They had been threading a labored zigzag up a long, fir-spotted ridge, gapped and cluttered with jagged ledges. There was no trail—hardly footing for their horses—and ahead the hogback steepened into apparent impassability; but Deputy McHenry knew these mountains. If some down tree, fallen since last he had climbed here deer hunting, did

not block their way, they could make it finally up this devil's rockpile, and so to Paso Borrado.

"If they're forted up there—an' I reckon they will be—" he said, "maybe we can kinder size things up. If it looks too tough, two of us can stay to hold 'em, in case they git fidgety, while the other 'un goes back for more man-power. But if they sight us an' open the fight themselves—well——" Here McHenry had run out of words and patted his gun. If he had noticed the nervous widening of Johnny Rutland's eyes, or the spasmodic clenching and unclenching of his fists, the deputy gave no sign of it. But he grinned a little when the young sheriff spurred up to take the lead.

"Take it easy, Johnny. We'll git to your little ol' dogfight plenty quick enough without hurryin'. An' you better let me take the lead for a while—I sorter know the way. Steady does it, Johnny!"

Steady does it.

At the sudden sound of shooting the three men jerked rein simultaneously, but only Johnny Rutland's hand reached in panic to tug at the carbine booted under his knee.

McHenry and Kelso rested sidewise in their saddles and listened calculatingly.

"Don't hear no bullets hittin' these rocks, Mac. What you reckon?"

"That shootin' ain't up at the Paso neither—listen!"

Under a too tight rein Johnny Rutland's horse stamped fretfully.

"Better give him his head a little, Johnny. He's makin' a lot of racket." McHenry spoke quietly, without rebuke, but Johnny Rutland felt a flush of shame redden the yellowish pallor of his tanned cheeks. What right had he to be wearing the star when his deputies even had to tell him to keep his horse quiet? He slacked the reins with a shaky hand.

"There's both a six-gun an' a rifle talkin' up there—but prob'ly not fightin'," said McHenry. "Them shots is spaced. You notice that, Johnny? Signals, I'd figger. An' they come from the boulder bench at the top of that next ridge to the left. Boys, I'd guess it thisaway: suppose Wild Buck an' Pot-Shot *didn't* git to the Paso, but got hung up somewheres up yonder, not knowin' this country like ol' Blondy Dutch. Then they hear us—or see us—an' they start shootin' off signals to Blondy, either to warn him we're comin' or git him to come meet 'em an' guide 'em on into the Paso before we git up there. If I'm right, boys, it's our chance. What's the orders, Sheriff?"

In spite of him, Johnny Rutland's eyes stood wide and bulging, but he managed to make his voice steady, scared as he was.

"We better get up there," he said, "as —as quick as we can."

FROM his hidden vantage point Flojo saw them coming. He grinned sourly at the knots on a dead snag that his carefully spaced shots had splintered. It was a lousy trick, maybe, but it had pulled them off the trail to the Paso Borrado, temporarily at least. But after all, what for? A yellow streak would come to light sooner or later, anyhow—what good to postpone it? And when they got here and found it was only old Flojo, the lousy pack-rat, then what?

Flojo scraped a grimy pocket for tobacco trash enough for a scanty chew and threw it into his mouth—most of it. Some clung unnoticed, to his whiskers. He snugged his last four cartridges into the cylinder of his .45. For the rifle there was still one more. It was always hard to make a grubstaker realize that a man needed ammunition, even loafing at prospecting.

Well, to hell with it. McHenry and Kelso would be bound to figure him in cahoots with the killers now. They'd be obliged to arrest him. He might make a show of fight to be sure of it. He'd cut up like hell—after they had him. Then one of 'em would have to take him in to jail—or anyhow stay and guard him. If he worked it right, that one might be Johnny. Maybe he'd show guts enough for that job, at least.

Speculatively he sighted his carbine upon glimpses of Sheriff Rutland and his deputies, as they zigzagged the timber to find a way up the last steep of the rocky ridge. He wondered grimly what Sheriff Johnny Rutland would do if he suddenly felt his horse shot out from under him. Serve the damn fool right, gittin' himself elected sheriff thisaway. Flojo's finger snugged close to the trigger; but he did not press it.

If Wild Buck and Pot-Shot and Blondy Dutch, forted up in the Paso, or wherever they were, had heard his shots, it might give them a hunch to pull out tonight if they figured there was actually a big enough posse at work to be signalling. He hoped to God they had heard 'em.

Like the crisp snap of a whip a rifle shot *whapped* the air somewhere out along the boulder-bench to his left. From farther, and down a little, rose the scream of a wounded horse, and after it a man's hoarse shout.

Wild Buck Tompkins and Pot-Shot

Lumbaugh were no expert woodsmen. They had not found Flojo's explicit directions for gettting to Paso Borrado easy to follow. Less than half a mile from their goal, they had hung up on this thicketed, boulder-cluttered bench. Lying low during the daylight, they had heard Flojo's dozen shots, skulked to the bench rim and glimpsed the officers coming up the ridge. And they had not run away.

LIKE a jumped bobcat Flojo came from behind his rocky hiding and plunged at a wild, face-whipped run into the thicket toward the juncture of ridge and bench whence that shot had come. He came through the dense thicket into big timber with a yell that was half challenge, half warning. He knew this was no way to attack in such country, but there was no time now for still-hunting and stalking.

From a little distance out ahead came the roar of gun-talk. He glimpsed man-movement. Over a boulder-rim yellow flame spat through the somber fir shadow. As his own grip closed tight on the trigger, Flojo felt the jolt of a terrific blow strike his middle. As he staggered down he glimpsed the dark head of Pot-Shot Lumbaugh rising from behind the boulder whence the shot had come, saw it turn away from him, heard the roar of Lumbaugh's gun going into fast action, in the other direction, and beyond, a hazy, man-shaped shadow coming swiftly, from tree to tree.

Flojo strained himself somehow up to his elbows. Yonder to the left, farther out on the bench a tallish man was running—leaping through the stone-clutter and log-fall like a spooked buck—*running away.* Flojo could not bat the haze from his eyes enough to see who it was. He tried to raise his six-shooter, but it had suddenly grown to weigh a ton.

He eased down to the ground again, cursing himself in a hoarse mutter:

"*Flojo*—jest too dammed *flojo!*"

IT WAS McHenry's right arm that raised him, head and shoulders, a little from the ground. The deputy's other arm hung limp.

"They git you, Tom?"

Flojo was not too far gone to notice that the man said "Tom," not "Flojo," now.

"The kid, the poor damn kid, tryin' to be a sheriff!" he gritted out. "Don't be too hard on him, Mac. I—I seen him run, but——"

"Run? I tried to holler him back, but when Pot-Shot cut you down, Johnny jest got up an' went to him, that's all, a-shootin' ever' jump. He'd have taken right out after Wild Buck, too, with jest one leg to go on, if I hadn't managed to wing Buck down myownself. You damn Rutlands, Tom—" McHenry's voice softened suddenly—"plumb damn fools, him an' you both! What ailed you to come wolfin' up here into this fight, anyhow, an' git yourself all——?"

Then when he saw that Flojo Tom Rutland would not live to answer him, he suddenly understood.

"Can you make it over here, Johnny?" he said quietly over his shoulder. "Purty quick."

For a man with a broken, bullet-ripped leg Sheriff Johnny Rutland was making quick work of crawling to the older brother whom men called "Flojo." There was no one to help him, for he had already sent Deputy Kelso to hold the rest of the gang in Paso Borrado if he could until McHenry could ride for more men.

"God, Tom," Johnny said, "I didn't know you was hit that bad."

Flojo shook his head. A snaggy toothed grin split his unkempt whiskers. A finger pointed weakly at the gleam of star on the other's jacket. There were few words left, now, in Flojo Rutland. But he got them said:

"Sheriff . . . . . g-guts, Johnny. . . . . ."

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An American Gangster Tries to Corner the African Ape Market

Corner In Apes

By ALEXANDER LAKE

"YOU'LL be playing with death if you accept this proposition," Dr. Morgan Stanley, world-famous chemist, told Chuck Lane, American aviator, whose exploits had made him one of the most notable figures in South Africa. "Playing with death," he repeated, "but if you want to take the gamble I'll pay you one thousand pounds—that's five thousand dollars—for one hundred live, gray apes delivered to our laboratories in Johannesburg within thirty days."

"I'd go up against the whole Russian army for five thousand dollars," replied Chuck. "Ubusuku, my Zulu flying partner, and I have garnered a wealth of thrills in five years of flying in this country, but outside the fifteen thousand bucks we paid for our monoplane we haven't made much jack. I'm interested. What's the low-down?"

"Ordinarily," said Stanley, "gray apes aren't worth five bob each. But the most damnable situation has developed since the rejuvenation craze has struck the old playboys with the big money in America and Europe. For years our laboratories have been making gland serums, but recently the demand has quadrupled. Under ordinary conditions we would have difficulty filling orders, but to make matters really bad, a gang of crooked gland specialists have opened up sanitariums all over

Europe. They have made the rejuvenation of old codgers the biggest racket in the world. In order to keep prices sky high they have *practically cornered the African gray ape market!*"

"Yeah? Where do I come in?"

"I sent for you because I believe you are the only man in South Africa who can get us the apes we want."

"Huh. Looks like a fast one coming up. You guys in this country never send for me unless you got something too hot for you to handle yourselves. Go on. What's the dope?"

"If we can get a shipment of gland serum off to Belgium within sixty days we can bust up the ring. It takes us a month to manufacture the stuff after we get the apes. We want a hundred live apes in thirty days."

"O. K. But what's the catch?"

"It's a serious one. Gunmen from the States and other countries have been hired to keep anyone from capturing the animals. We insist on apes from the Magalisberg District, because we have found them practically free of disease. And at that ape colony the gang has posted two of the most vicious crooks in Christendom. We have never used white hunters before. But natives are hopeless. The two renegades guarding the Magalisberg District apes have already killed five of the poor kaffirs."

"The dirty lice," said Chuck. He turned to Ubusuku, who squatted on his haunches in the corner of the room:

"Sounds like a scrap, big boy! But we can take it. Huh?"

"Yebo, O Chuck—and when!"

"You mean 'and how!' y' big baboon. Can't I ever teach you to talk American?"

"Talk," said Ubusuku, "is the language of women. Action is the speech of men."

"O. K.," laughed Chuck, and turned back to Stanley. "What's the matter with the police? Haven't you got them on the job?"

"So far they have done little but offer a reward for the capture of those two thugs. They won't take any real action until a white man is killed."

"And maybe I'll be the white man, eh? Well, they can't scare me away from five thousand berries. You'll have a hundred live, husky apes at your laboratories within thirty days—or else."

AN HOUR later as Chuck and Ubusuku wheeled their bright, red low-winged monoplane out of the hangar, the American asked:

"Do you know the Magalisberg District where these apes are?"

"Like I know my own kraal, O Chuck. The apes dwell on a certain green hill close to the Crocodile River. By using a trick taught me in my youth we will capture many times one hundred apes in three weeks. That will allow us one week to trek them to the railroad and ship them to Johannesburg."

"Three weeks. Many times one hundred apes? We only want one hundred, y' black monkey."

"One hundred apes in the prime of life, O brother. Apes four or five years old. We will need secure many times that number to get a hundred of the age required by the great white doctor with hair like a wind-torn thatch."

"Doggone, that's so. Well, we can do it, can't we?"

"I know a trick, O American."

"Fine. Let's have it."

"We need ten of those square tins that contain five gallons of paraffin."

"You want fifty gallons of kerosene?"

"*Ikona.* The cans must be empty."

"Huh? Well, that's easy. Then what?"

"And then, O foolhardy one, we need many cakes of leaven such as white people use to make light their bread."

"Leaven? Oh, you mean yeast cakes."

"Yebo."

"Yeast cakes? *Yeast cakes!* What th' hell?"

"I go to gather the cans."

"Listen, why the cans and the yeast cakes?"

"The fish whose head is too heavy with knowledge swims with his hind end uppermost, O Chuck. I go to gather the cans."

Chuck laughed. "All right, big boy, go get the cans, and don't forget the yeast cakes. Keep your lousy secret if you want to. I think you're half ape yourself."

CHUCK sent the plane into the sky at noon, flashed over Pretoria, half an hour later, then followed the spiny ridge of the Magalisberg Mountains until the narrow, muddy waters of the Crocodile glinted like copper below them.

Ubusuku, who sat in the front cockpit with five-gallon cans piled up to his neck, shouted back through the propeller roar:

"Land, O Chuck, between the high red kopje and the smaller green one. In the trees of the green one dwell the little gray men we seek. The Zulus call it 'the mountain of the apes.'"

Chuck set the ship down on a gentle, treeless slope almost half way between the

two hills. The red kopje was of weather-beaten rock. A few scattered thorn and *stamfrachte* trees grew stubbornly among the boulders. Hundreds of baboons, frightened by the plane, loped and hunched themselves toward the caves at the kopje's peak. The hurrying ones were urged on by hoarse gruntings and barkings from baboon sentries posted atop high rocks and in the larger thorn trees.

The green kopje, like a hill that had strayed from the range and taken root by itself, lay a quarter of a mile nearer the bush veldt. Its slopes were thickly covered with *moople* trees, heavy with their burdens of wild dates. A few wild orange and *naarjie* trees, also in bearing, fringed the foot of the western slope.

Ubusuku, his bare legs sticking down below his leather flying coat, pointed to the green hill.

"Look," he said, "in those wild orange trees nearest the sun. See them?"

"See what?"

"Apes."

Chuck looked searchingly. "I can't see anything that even looks like an ape," he said.

Ubusuku pulled him a few feet to one side. "Stoop a bit, O Chuck. Let the great branch on the right of the nearest orange tree come between you and the sun. See? Six little black balls like dots in a row?"

"Yeah. I see the balls. So what?"

"They are the heads of the apes. They sit quietly, like old men, watching the strange creatures that thundered down out of the sky. They are frightened now. But when they become used to us they will be noisy enough. They will chatter like old women advising a bride at her wedding."

Crack! A bullet smacked into the earth at their feet, and ricochetted toward the river with a vicious whine. An echo of the shot, almost as threatening as the actual report, spat at them from the hills. Ubusuku jumped like a startled springbok, but Chuck, jaws suddenly clamped tight, turned toward the source of the bullet.

AT THE very peak of the red kopje, rifle in hand, stood a human figure clearly silhouetted against the afternoon sky. As the two stared at the ominous marksman a voice snarled from the trees behind them:

"White man, tyke that bloody kaffir, an' get th' 'ell away from here. Go to yer ship, an' tyke off. Th' bloke on th' hill missed yer, but strike me blinkin' well pink if it's me whot tykes a pot at

yer, yer goin' t' have a slug in yer giddy guts. Start for yer ship, an' don't turn about t' look at me!"

With eyes blazing, and lips set in a grim line, Chuck said to Ubusuku: "Walk toward the ship with me. I want to get my rifle. Once I get my hand on it I'll show that smart guy what shooting is."

As if reading Chuck's thoughts the voice behind them warned: "One false move, white man, an' I'll drill yer right between th' shoulders. Go to yer ship, pull th' prop, an' be on yer bloody way."

"I'll grab the rifle, Ubusuku. You get th' gat. When I give the word, you break for the trees. I'll jump for that big rock. If that guy doesn't hit you sneak round behind him. I'll try and attract his attention—if he doesn't get me."

Ubusuku replied: "If this day you take the long journey, O Chuck, to the land of much corn, know that as you travel onward, Ubusuku will be dragging the carcass of yon son-of-a-pig not far behind you."

Rifle and automatic lay on the lower wing of the plane. The two paused momentarily beside them. "Now!" snapped Chuck, grabbing up the repeater. He leaped for the rock out-cropping several rods away. Simultaneously, Ubusuku clutched the revolver, ducked under the nose of the plane, and in tremendous zigzag bounds tore for the trees. A bullet from the kopje top slapped past the Zulu's head. Ubusuku reached the trees, leaped for an overhead limb, and swung himself out of sight. As he dropped to the ground after an orang-outang-like scramble from branch to branch, a flurry of bullets snarled through the trees above him. Smiling mirthlessly, he flitted away like a black shadow.

CHUCK had barely taken five jumps when a rifle cracked from across the clearing. The bullet felt like the kick of a mule as it whammed into the American's shoulder. Chuck pitched forward on his face, rolled over a couple of times, and lay still.

Bleeding profusely, he waited in pain-filled misery for his attacker to come out in the open. He had rolled deliberately with his head pointing in the direction from which the shot had come. His rifle, a shell in the chamber, was at his outstretched hand ready for instant use.

Hopefully he waited, but as the minutes dragged by there was still no sign of his enemy. Chuck dared not move to staunch the flow of blood. The slightest indication that he was alive would certainly bring another lead pill to finish him off. A mist moved before his eyes. The edge of the forest seemed to waver as he watched. "If he don't show pretty soon," he murmured through white lips, "I won't be able to see him at all. Wonder if they got Ubusuku."

Then from the trees stepped a human figure! Chuck gathered his tortured body for a supreme effort. Every nerve tensed. Every muscle set itself like a sprinter about to start a race. He must not miss! Then he groaned in disappointment. The figure was that of a black man—and it was not Ubusuku.

The black walked slowly, as if frightened. Half way across the clearing he paused and loosened an immense knobkerrie from the strap at his waist. Then with deadly club ready he again advanced.

"Going t' bash my brains out," mumbled Chuck. "Well, you won't do it, black boy. I've enough strength left to put a bullet through your belly, anyway."

Closer and closer drew the native. Chuck saw he was a Basuto. Again he tensed himself for action. His hand moved ever so little toward the rifle grip, then paused as a shrill yell, accompanied by a shot, broke from the trees behind the menacing Basuto. Chuck grinned as he watched Ubusuku and a white man tumble like fighting wild cats into the clearing.

He lifted his head. The Basuto saw the movement, yelled, and bounded toward him, club upraised. Chuck whipped the

rifle muzzle up and pressed the trigger. The Basuto jerked at the peak of his leap, then folded up and crashed to the ground.

Chuck looked toward the struggle at the clearing's edge just in time to see Ubusuku reach down, pick up his limp antagonist, throw him over his shoulder, and lope easily out into the clearing.

CRACK! One—two—three—four times the rifle barked from the red kopje. Bullets sprayed all about the big Zulu, but he plowed ahead as if all were serene. He dumped his unconscious burden down beside the dead Basuto, tied the man's hands and feet, then came over and got down on his hands and knees beside Chuck.

"Lay your gun across my back, O brother, and shoot that swamp-pig in the bowels."

Chuck, one hand dripping blood, and almost useless, sighted carefully over the black's massive back. The figure atop the kopje lifted its rifle. Chuck, murmuring, "Hold your breath, big boy," let drive. The figure leaped from the rock, turned and shook a fist at the American, then scrambled out of sight.

"Never mind, O Chuck," sympathized Ubusuku. "The longer he lives the more he'll stink when he's dead. I have the other *aardvark*. Shall I knock him on the head?"

"Blinkin' fools," said the voice of their prisoner. "Yer can't get away with this. Know who I am? Know who the bloke on th' hill is? Well, I'm Limehouse Horace Boggs, I am. And he's Scarface Moreno, from th' States!"

"Well, Limey, I never heard of either of you. Just what do you think you're doing, taking shots at us, huh?"

"Limey!" shrilled the other. "Don't call me Limey. I told yer I were Limehouse Horace——"

"O. K.—Horace. So what?"

"Blimey, if you ain't a card. We're the blokes what's hired to keep coves like yer from making away with these apes. Scarface is a professional gunman from th' States. He's bad, he is. Made his livin' killin' hundreds of chaps in the States. He told me hisself."

"American gangster, eh? Well, that's easy. If he's a gangster, he's yellow." Chuck looked curiously at the prisoner. "I suppose you think you're a bad hombre, too."

"Aye. I'm bad. I was once for a soldier, an' once for a sailor. I'm bad on land an' bad on the sea. I did a jolt in Dartmouth pen once." He scowled suddenly. "An' so help me I'll have yer bloomin' life for this outrage. Y' dirty, stinkin'——"

CHUCK cut the man's curses short with a slap across the mouth. Instantly Limey's snarls changed to whines.

"For th' love of Mike, shut up, you sniffling yellow-belly," jerked out Chuck in disgust. "If you don't, I'll let Ubusuku here bust your head in. If your pardner on the hill yonder hasn't any more guts than you I'll send one of these little gray apes to go bring him in."

"Whatcher goin' to do with me, mister?"

"Take you to Johannesburg and watch them hang you. But first we're going to get the apes we came after."

Limey snarled like a wolf. "Not on yer life, y' sneakin', blue-bellied—— Ow! Here, don't hurt a chap, mister black man," he yelped as Ubusuku raised a threatening hand.

"The lizard sticks out his tongue like a snake," grumbled Ubusuku, "but the snake eats lizards for breakfast."

"Now listen, Limey," said Chuck, as Ubusuku finished bandaging his shoulder. "You laid me up with a bum arm, so tomorrow morning you start working for Ubusuku. And I'll sit around with a gun in my hand and make you like it."

"Not on yer blinkin' life I won't work for no blinkin' kaffir. Cripes! Don't kick me, mister Zulu. I'll work hard for yer. I'll work like a bloody horse, I will."

WHILE Chuck sat on a rock, rifle in hand, Ubusuku and Limey gathered dates from nearby trees. Chuck kept a wary eye for Scarface but he never so much as showed his head, nor was a shot fired from the red hill.

When the dates had been gathered Ubusuku and Limey cut the tops from the five-gallon cans, and filled the cans with water from the river. Chuck had no idea what Ubusuku's plans to catch the apes were. The big black was having a lot of fun keeping the American in the dark as long as possible. Chuck smiled to himself.

As he watched the two sweating in the hot sun his mind flashed back to the day

five years ago when he had rescued Ubusuku from five Basuto renegades who had trapped him on the Karroo Desert. Since then, Ubusuku, a prince of the reigning house of Zululand, had been his constant companion. The black was keen for adventure, loved flying, and had proved a loyal friend. His strength was almost unbelievable, and his heart was the heart of a lion. Many times since the two had faced death together on the veldt, in the air, and in the jungles.

Under Ubusuku's direction Limey grumblingly crushed the wild dates, and put about a gallon of pulp in each can. Then the two spent several hours gathering grain from wild millet, barley and kaffir corn. This was ground between rocks, and mixed with the yeast cakes, then added to the mixture in the cans.

Chuck laughed aloud. "You making beer, Ubusuku? Going to make the apes drunk?"

"Yebo, O Chuck. Strong water is a trap that neither man nor ape can escape if he drinks of it. Wait, O Chuck, until the liquor has gathered strength, and you will see that when drunk an ape and a man act alike. I have seen apes drunk, O brother, and I have seen you——"

"Skip it, y' big baboon," snorted Chuck,

FOR three days Ubusuku's ape liquor stood in the sun and foamed. While the concoction was gathering strength Ubusuku and Limey gathered tree limbs and built six strong cages. Limey never stopped fussing. When he wasn't cursing the Zulu, he was whining for mercy. Once he tried to make a break for freedom, but Ubusuku overtook him in six jumps, turned him over his knee and whaled him plenty. Limey's howls sent the apes scurrying in all directions screeching in fright. Scarface seemed to have vanished. They neither saw nor heard him all that time. But it was only the lull before the storm.

The next morning Ubusuku announced: "And now, O Chuck, we go to catch an ape, and teach him the evils of strong drink so that he may return to his fellows and teach them the evil also."

Ubusuku had found a dried gourd. He made a tiny hole in it, and shook out the insides. To the gourd he fastened a leather strap. When the three came within about one hundred feet of the orange trees Ubusuku motioned the white men to stop. Apes fled before him through the branches as he approached to set the trap. One end of the strap he fastened to a small tree. He took something from his pocket and dropped it into the hole in the gourd. Then he set the gourd on the ground and squatted beside it. For many minutes he sat quietly, frequently touching the gourd with his hand, then putting his hand to his mouth.

Soon the apes that had fled at his approach began returning. They advanced cautiously, their chatter stilled. Closer and closer they came to the tree below which Ubusuku still squatted, monotonously

touching the gourd with a hand, then withdrawing it.

AT LAST the apes would come no closer. Scores of them sat silently in nearby trees and observed the big black with single-minded intentness. Finally, the Zulu rose and walked away, and the apes screeching in sudden fright, scampered in all directions through the tree tops. They didn't go far. As Ubusuku arrived at the spot where Chuck and Limey waited, an old gray ape, evidently the troop leader, scrambled to the ground and approached the gourd in a halting, sideways fashion.

The nearer he approached the more timid he became, and the quieter grew the ring of curious apes who stared at the daring old fellow. He reached the gourd and touched it nervously. Nothing happened. He squatted in imitation of Ubusuku and contemplated the gourd solemnly. Again he touched it, waited a few moments, and touched it once more. Then poked it rapidly several times in succession. The ring of apes above him seemed to hold their breaths.

Now he picked the gourd up and started off with it, but the strap fastened to the tree prevented. He became angry. He danced up and down and shook the gourd with both hands. Suddenly he grew motionless, seemed to be listening, then shook the gourd again.

"I dropped some kernels of mealies—you call them corn—in the gourd, and he hears them rattling," explained Ubusuku. "He'll never be content now until he finds out what makes the noise. Watch him."

The old fellow turned the gourd over and over, saw the little hole, and pushed his hand in a short way and withdrew it. Then, as if suddenly making up his mind, he pushed his hand and forearm in almost to the elbow.

"He's feeling for the mealies," said Ubusuku.

Evidently the ape found the kernels for he abruptly dropped the gourd, and started away. His hand didn't come out and the falling gourd jerked him to his haunches. The old fellow tugged furiously without success. His hand still remained inside the hollow shell. Ubusuku started for him on the run, and the old boy grew frantic.

Ubusuku grabbed him by the neck, and jerked the strap from the tree. With the ape chittering and swearing in one hand, and with the gourd in the other, the ape's hand still in it, Ubusuku again returned to where Chuck and Limey waited.

"Poor gray devil," said Chuck, as Ubusuku paused before him. "Did you put a trap in that gourd?"

"He trapped himself, O Chuck. The old fool reached into the gourd and closed his fist about the mealies. The hole is just large enough to let his open hand go in. It is too small to let the closed fist out. If this old boy had enough sense to open his hand it would come out as easily as it went in."

"Do you mean to tell me that's all that's holding him—just his closed fist?"

"That is all, O Chuck."

"Well, I'm damned. Won't he ever open it up?"

"He'll starve first. He hasn't any more brains than Limey."

"Here, none o' that, you damn' kaffir. I'll shove a knife in yer belly. Holy hell, don't pinch me! I say, don't hurt a poor blighter, dear mister Zulu!"

"Come," said Ubusuku, ignoring the yelping cockney, "Let us teach this ape the evils of drink."

A FEW minutes later Ubusuku forced a few mouthfuls of the liquor into the angry ape's mouth, then wrapping the strap around the can, set ape and gourd upon the ground. For a time the ape lay still, then sat up suddenly, shook his head, sniffed his free hand, then lifted his head and sniffed the air. He stood to his feet, one hand still in the gourd, and put the other on the can's edge and looked in. He tasted the liquid a few times, then lapped

greedily. After a few moments his fist in the gourd relaxed, and he withdrew the hand. Instead of attempting to escape, he placed the freed hand beside the other on the rim of the can and really got down to serious drinking.

At last he tried to straighten up. His legs collapsed and he fell on his back. He chattered angrily, tried to get to his feet, and sprawled on his face. He got his rear end in the air, tried to stand erect, and fell on his face. He jabbered furiously, got to his feet and tried to step forward. Instead he staggered a few paces in a half-circle, then sat down abruptly. He put one hand to his head, started to lie down, saw the can of beer and changed his mind. Grunting he hoisted himself to his hands and feet and in a series of lurches managed to grasp the rim of the can with both hands. Try as he would he could not stand erect long enough to get his head over the edge. Finally, one hand dropped to his side, and he hung, half turned around, by the other. He belched a couple of times, and with a silly grin slumped in a heap on the ground.

Ubusuku walked over and picked the little fellow up. The ape opened one bleary eye, saw Ubusuku's friendly black face, gave a glad squeak and threw both arms about the Zulu's neck. Then he snuggled his befuddled head upon the black's massive chest and fell peacefully asleep.

"Well, by God," said Chuck at last. "I've done a lot of queer things in my life, but I never thought I'd end up by contributing to the delinquency of an ape!"

That night Scarface kept up an intermittent fire from the red hill. Ubusuku disappeared into the trees. Shortly after dawn he returned and whispered to Chuck:

"I didn't find Scarface, O brother, but I found the cave in which he lurks. We will get him another time."

AFTER breakfast Ubusuku and Limey carried the cans of foaming liquor to the orange trees and placed them in a row. Beside the cans they laid the drunken ape, who had taken on another load of dynamite that morning. Then the three, Chuck with a wary eye on Limey, retired to watch.

After a time apes of all ages and sizes gathered about the cans. None, however, made any attempt to drink. At last the drunken one awoke, rose to his feet, staggered a few paces, saw the cans, and promptly made a bee-line for them. He began guzzling thirstily. A few apes timidly imitated the drinking one. They tasted, made wry faces, showed their teeth, and started to hunch themselves away. Suddenly they stopped, turned and looked at the cans, and hastily returned to drink copiously. Others followed their lead, and soon scores of apes crowded around the cans fighting, biting, squealing—all frantic to get their share of the exhilarating draught.

A few mouthfuls were all that were needed to set the little anthropoids on their ears. Soon the scene became a madhouse. Apes staggered about, bumped one another, made passes that missed a mile,

fell on their bellies, and flat on their backs. Some passed out beside the cans, and were promptly dragged out of the way by others eager to take on a few. The noise of the debauch attracted other troops of apes. In an hour hundreds were swarming about the liquor, and the heaps of the inebriated grew steadily larger.

Into this bacchanalia came Chuck, Ubusuku and Limey. The apes who had not tasted the alcoholic delight fled into the trees. But those who had drunk deeply lay stretched on the ground, or staggered

about in erratic curves, too tight to care about anything.

The three men promptly began selecting the healthiest of the young males, and tied their feet together. Once in a while some squiffy anthropoid would make a dash for a tree, scramble up a few feet, clutch wildly at the empty air, and come tumbling down again. Chuck was almost sick with laughter. Ubusuku worked solemnly, smiling only when some toper full of alcoholic courage took a poke at him.

When they had forty-six husky males secured they carried them to the cages. Ubusuku covered the beer cans, and Limey, under Chuck's direction, prepared supper.

THE next day was entirely wasted. Scarface kept up an accurate fire from different positions on the hill, and so closely did his shots fly that Chuck and Ubusuku hardly dared show their heads. While Chuck was feeding the captured apes, Limey lying in the shadow of a rock, called to Ubusuku.

"I say, Hubusuku," he whispered slyly, "how'd you like to make a bit o' money? A goodish bit."

"I listen, O white snake."

"Here, here, that's not nice. Wot?" Limey leered knowingly up at the Zulu. "We understand one another, don't we, Hubusuku? Tell yer what it is. Loosen these ropes on me hands an' I'll see that yer gets fifty pound—all in nice, shiny, gold sovereigns. How's that? What say?"

"I listen."

"Loosen me hands, I say, an' I'll sneak up on that American blighter while he sleeps. I'll take him to Scarface, who'll give th' blasted idiot wot bloody ho—then cut his lousy heart out. What say? Will yer do it?"

"I will think on it, O snail, and tell you later."

Ubusuku told Chuck of Limey's proposal. Chuck grinned. "O. K., big boy. We'll take him on. There's a reward for these babies—and let's go get it. Huh? Listen. When I pass you the word, you loosen his bonds. He'll take me to Scarface. You know where his hangout is. You follow us, and when the right moment comes we'll take them for a cleaning."

"The gods smile on the plans of the reckless, O Chuck. The scheme smells of blood, therefore, I like it."

"O. K.," said Chuck. "It's a deal."

NEXT morning Chuck winged Scarface on his first shot. The gangster dropped his rifle, leaped from behind his sheltering rock, and ran for other cover. He fired no more that day.

By supper time a hundred and fifteen apes were in the cages. Ubusuku loped into the darkness to a kaffir kraal twenty miles away, where he rented three ox-wagons, their drivers and *voor-loopers*. He returned to the camp at the head of the procession two days later. Before nightfall the cages were tied to the wagon beds.

"We'll start for Britz railroad station first thing in the morning," said Chuck as they prepared to sleep. He lay down, soon he appeared to be asleep, but he was never wider awake in his life. Every nerve throbbed with excitement as he prepared to take the biggest gamble of his life.

Ubusuku tiptoed to where Limey was lying, whispered a moment, and loosened his bonds. "I go now," he said, "but will return for the money." He disappeared into the darkness.

Limey got cautiously to his feet, stole to Chuck's side, picked up the American's revolver, then kicked him in the ribs. "Get up, y' bloody Yank," he ordered.

Chuck got to his feet cursing. He didn't have to pretend. His sore ribs had him boiling mad. Limey forced him at pistol's point to the ape cages. He lifted their crude doors and with a stick prodded the bewildered creatures into the open. "You'll take these apes to Johannesburg, eh?" he sneered. "That's hot, that is. You won't even get there yerself."

Chuck hadn't figured on this, and towering rage shook him. "All right, you yellow-belly," he growled. "You win with the apes, but you'll pay plenty—plenty."

"Shut up," snarled Limey, and he blew shrilly through his fingers. From far up on the red kopje an answering whistle sounded. Limey smiled wryly. "Scarface is comin' t' meet us at the base o' the hill."

As Chuck stumbled through the brush ahead of Limey, Ubusuku returned to the camp and calmed the frightened ox drivers. He warned them to protect the plane with their lives, and not to leave the camp on pain of death. Then like a black panther he flitted into the night.

CHUCK tripped and fell. Limey cursed him, and kicked him twice. The American's blood boiled, and it was with a violent effort he kept his hands off the Cockney.

Suddenly Scarface loomed like a monster shadow before them. "You th' guy that shot me in th' hand?" he asked, shoving his face close to Chuck's.

"Yep."

Whang! Scarface rapped Chuck over the head with his revolver barrel. The American went to his knees, shook his head, wiped the blood out of his eyes, and got shakily to his feet. "Tough guy, huh?" said Scarface. "Well, we'll soon see how tough y' are. Get goin'—all th' way to th' top." He pushed Chuck ahead of him. He turned to Limey. "Got away, huh? Good work—r-rat!"

Time after time Chuck fell in the darkness. His knees were cut and bleeding. His palms were gashed almost to the bone. Once he struck his wounded shoulder on a stone as he stumbled, and the pain almost made him yell. Every time he went down Limey kicked him as he arose. Chuck was practically insane with rage and pain when at last they came to Scarface's cave.

Inside he collapsed on the hard floor. Scarface threw a can of water on his face reviving him somewhat. The gangster lighted a candle and placed it on a rickety box. In the dim light Chuck thought Scarface looked gigantic. His heart sank. "Scarface is as big as Ubusuku," he thought. "Supposing old Ubusuku can't take him."

SCARFACE towered over him. His huge body cast a grotesque shadow on the cave's wall. He spat in Chuck's face. Chuck cursing struggled to his knees, but Scarface pushed him back with his foot. The American lay panting, too weak to even swear. Limey chuckled, and sat down at the cave's entrance.

"Listen, punk," snarled Scarface. "This is quick. See? When a gee crosses my plans I croak him. There ain't no out. But I want something from you. See? I want you t' fly me in that ship o' yours to another spot we're workin' at. See? I'm smart and I'm hard. Do you fly me?"

Chuck listened for some sound that would indicate Ubusuku's presence outside the cave. There was only silence. Supposing Ubusuku had failed. Suddenly he didn't care. This big bluff in front of him had struck him, kicked him, *spat* on him. His blood boiled through his tortured body. He stood dizzily to his feet.

"Cripes," he sneered, "I thought guys like you only lived in books. You're crazy. Smart? You? Cripes! You tough? Don't make me laugh. You're just plain dumb, and yellow clean to your liver. Fly you? I wouldn't use you for manure."

Scarface sucked in his breath. He tried to speak, stuttered in choked fury, then pulled his revolver. Shaking with rage he pointed the muzzle at Chuck's breast. Then he froze as if turned to stone. A black hand had reached from behind him and with crushing fingers gripped the wrist of the hand that held the gun. The revolver clattered to the floor.

Scarface tried to whip around but another black hand went around him from behind, and bound the gangster's left arm

to his side like a band of iron. Scarface cursed, and the black hand shifted from his body to his throat. The ebony fingers sank deep into the neck.

"Ataboy, Ubusuku!" Chuck got to his feet. Limey, mouthing curses, pulled the revolver he had taken from Chuck. The American laughed, bent over and picked up Scarface's pistol, just as Limey pulled the trigger. A sharp click was the only result. Chuck grinned as he shoved Scarface's revolver in Limey's ribs. "Y' didn't think I'd let you steal a loaded revolver, did y'?" he said as he tied the Cockney tightly.

HE TURNED to the battle of the giants. Scarface, his mouth drawn tight with pain, was bent almost double. Sweat stood on his forehead, then trickled down his cheeks. The gangster's eyes bulged as Ubusuku's hand shut off his wind. His face grew almost black in the flickering candle light. Ubusuku, exerting every ounce of his strength, was trying to force Scarface's right arm backward. The gangster, gurgling heavily, heaved suddenly, and Ubusuku's throat-hold broke. Quick as lightning Scarface shot his left hand upward, but the Zulu's hand was quicker, and his powerful fingers closed relentlessly around the gangster's left wrist. Both men breathed in gasps. Strained almost to breaking the muscles of both mighty bodies stood out like ridges. Chuck stared in awe. A silent, almost motionless battle of brute strength!

Limey whimpered as he lay on the floor staring wild-eyed at the struggling men. Scarface moaned. His right arm began moving back under his armpit. Ubusuku, teeth clenched, eyes tightly closed, was using every particle of his might. Scarface breathed now in tremendous sobs. He ground his teeth, and the veins on his neck stood out like pencils. But still his hand was forced back.

Then he went to his knees, heaved his shoulders, and Ubusuku went hurtling over his head like an acrobat. Chuck gasped in dismay. Then sighed with relief as Scarface's right arm broke with the sound of a pistol shot. The black had not loosened his hold as he was sent flying over the other's head.

SCARFACE sank on his face. Ubusuku, panting like a tired dog, bound him hand and foot. "I sneaked in when Scarface went to meet you, O Chuck," he panted. "Truly, Death grinned at us and passed on tonight."

"O Mister Zulusuku, I mean, Mister Hubuzulu, yer wouldn't hurt a poor, defenseless bloke, I'm sure. I will willingly do yer a favor, dear sir. I have said many times that Scarface ought t' have his bleedin' throat cut, an' if you'll be so kind, black sir, an' let me slit it, I am sure yer'll see I want to be friendly like. I want very much t' pay yer the fifty pound——"

"You shut up, you louse," snapped Chuck. He turned to Ubusuku. "We win, and we lose. The apes got away."

"Not so, O Chuck. We will find the apes by the liquor cans in the morning."

"But there's no beer left!"

"A little, O brother, of the liquor is left, but all of the mash. Never fear, we will find the apes there."

Ubusuku was right. Beside the cans the next morning the apes were making whoopee. Three hours later a hundred and two of them were in the wagons on their way to Britz depot.

"And now," sighed Chuck, as he rested his weary body in the shadow of the plane, "we'll wait here for the constables to come and get these birds. I sent a note to the station-master by one of the kaffirs. Then, Ubusuku, we'll high-tail to Jo'burg and collect five thousand simoleons. And baby, will I have fun jingling them in my pants! And so would you, y' ape, if I could persuade you to wear pants."

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